Unnamed Memory
The Queen Without a Throne
Kuji Furumiya
Illustration by chibi
II

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Kuji Furumiya
Illustration by chibi
Unnamed Memory II
The Queen Without a Throne

"Tinasha!"
"My contract with you ends tonight."
"There's still time left on it."
Oscar felt like he was trapped in some awful dream. His witch, the person he should've known better than anyone, now felt terribly far away from him.
An unmistakable belligerence blazed in Tinasha's dark eyes.
"If you intend to hurt Lanak, you'll have to go through me."

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Afterword

Unnamed Memory

The Queen Without a Throne

II

Kuji Furumiya

Illustration by chibi

YEN ON
NEW YORK

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Unnamed Memory
Volume 2
Kuji Furumiya
Translation by Sarah Tangney
Cover art by chibi
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Character Profiles

Farsas

Oscar
Crown prince of the kingdom of Farsas. Bearer of the legendary royal sword Akashia, which can neutralize magic.

Tinasha
Also known as the Witch of the Azure Moon. Formed a contract with Oscar to stay with him for one year and try to break his curse.

Lazar
Oscar's childhood friend and a royal attendant. A young man who has been through a lot in the service of his lord.

Als
A general. The most capable person in the military and Oscar's sparring partner.

Meredina
A commanding officer. Als's childhood friend and a woman who boasts incredible sword skills.

Kav
A mage. A very inquisitive young man who doesn't shy away from Tinasha.

Kumu
A mage. An older man who's the current royal chief mage.

Sylvia
A mage. A beautiful blond woman who is sweet and kind but a little ditzy.

Doan
A mage. A talented young man who is well-known to be the next in line for the position of royal chief mage.

Cuscull

Lanak
A young man who was the crown prince of Tuldarr four hundred years ago. Presently Cuscull's king.

Renart
A mage of Tayiri descent. He allied himself with Cuscull in a bid for revenge.

Pamyra
A spirit sorcerer who serves Tinasha. Hides the fact that she hails from the territory of Old Tuldarr.

Bardalos
Chief mage. In the past, he was banished from his home country for committing genocide.

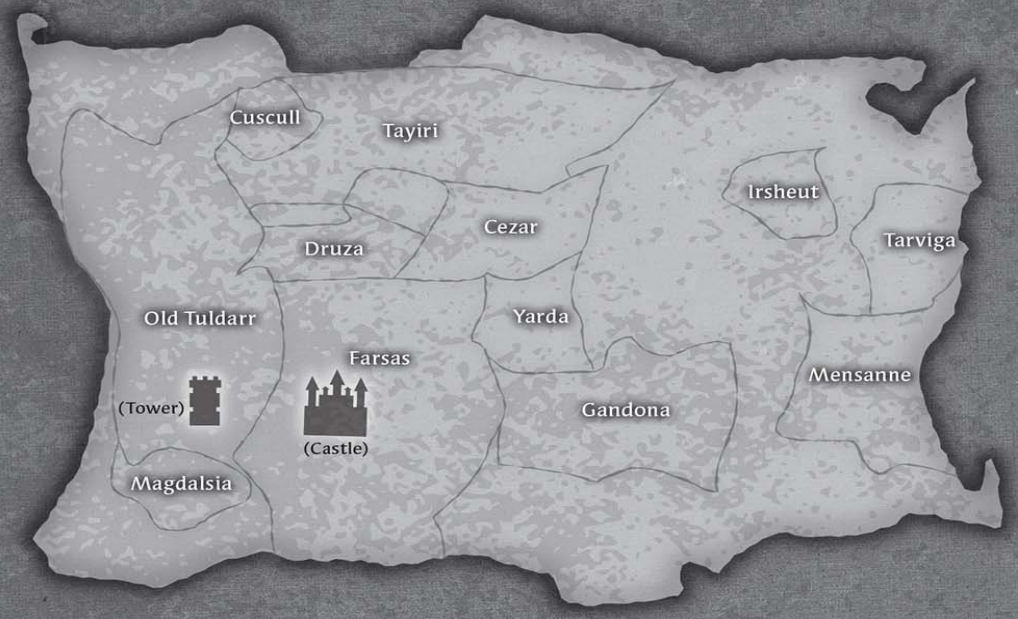
Others

Lucrezia
Also known as the Witch of the Forbidden Forest. Tinasha's friend who lives deep in a wooded area in the northeastern lands of Farsas.

Reust
Crown prince of the military empire of Tayiri, which ostracizes mages.

The Lands of *Unnamed Memory*

Current Year: 1654 (526 by Farsas historical reckoning)



After the gods fled, the Dark Age descended on this land.
During this era of betrayal and war, some nations
came to flourish while others perished.
After seven hundred years, the age came to a close.
Amid the blossoming peace, a new calamity emerged.
Five women standing in the shadows of history—
each an embodiment of incredible power.
This new time would come to be
known as the Age of Witches.

1. The Call of the Soul

Five witches lived in these lands.

The immense power these abnormal beings possessed granted them endless life spans.

Pushing beyond the limits of any known mage, this quintet of women came with unthinkable might.

For all those who lived in this world, the witches lurking in the shadows of history came to symbolize fear and calamity.

You should never meet a witch.

You should never listen to a witch.

You should never try to understand a witch.

The old fairy tales were true.

Witches disturbed the flow of fate. They were even said to have destroyed entire countries overnight.

It is for that reason that people dubbed the era that followed the Dark Age…the Age of Witches.

※

“The Age of Witches, huh? People throw that phrase around a lot, but I’m not so sure about it. It’s scarier than it needs to be.”

Farsas was a kingdom situated at the center of the continent.

In its castle, a young man took a moment to look up from the work that had been laid out on his desk.

He had brown hair, nearly black, and eyes the color of a lightening night sky. His fine features exuded the nobility of his bloodline, though they were tinged with childishness at times. The crown prince, twenty years of age that year, received an appalled look in response.

“Oscar… You should be a little more wary. What do you think witches even are?” a woman with a breathtakingly beautiful face retorted coolly. She had long, inky-black hair and eyes of the same color. Her snow-white skin set off her striking features and gave her the appearance of a painted doll. She appeared to be younger than the man, but there was a certain sense of eternity in her gaze.

She was a witch, one of only five in all the land.

The Witch of the Azure Moon, Tinasha, was said to be the strongest of the five. She presented Oscar—the man who'd formed a contract with her—a cup of tea she'd brewed herself. He thanked her as he took it.

"Why is the current era known as the Age of Witches in the first place? Did you do something?" he asked.

"There are five witches. Why are you pinning all the blame on me? You're wrong, regardless. Although I suppose I can't say I had nothing to do with it in the beginning," Tinasha said, waving her hand dismissively. "About three hundred years ago, a country to the northwest called Helginis locked up the Witch Who Cannot Be Summoned. Helginis mages tried to weave a huge destruction spell using her as the catalyst."

"What? I've never heard of that," Oscar said. As part of his statesman's education, he had learned the basics of regional history, but this was his first time hearing of destruction magic using a witch as a catalyst.

Tinasha made a face, still holding the tea things. "That's because everyone involved at the time died, except the witches of course. It's not something that was spoken of openly. And any sort of large-scale destruction magic, whether it uses humans as catalysts or not, is classified as a forbidden curse. However, the one they attempted back then was on a whole different scale. If they'd managed to pull off the spell, it would've no doubt irreparably altered the entire continent. Naturally, with something so dire at stake, the other four witches—myself included—refused to stand by and let the Helginis mages do as they pleased.

"So what happened?"

"We had no choice but to intervene in the situation in Helginis and release the Witch Who Cannot Be Summoned. Once we did, she destroyed the entire country in a single night."

"……."

"From then on, the term *Age of Witches* started cropping up…," Tinasha concluded.

"What a mess…," Oscar remarked. Just listening to it was enough to give him a headache. He rubbed his temples.

Compared with the gruesome era colored by war and betrayal that was the Dark Age, the Age of Witches was largely peaceful, with only a few currents of discord. Perhaps that was the natural result of people cowering in fear of the supremely powerful witches.

Oscar eyed Tinasha, a witch capable of taking on an entire army alone. "Destroyed a country in one night, huh? That's more than just an old story?"

"The Dark Age was rife with tales like that," Tinasha said with a smile, but her dark eyes revealed none of what she was thinking. She realized Oscar was staring at her and arched one shapely brow. "If you've learned your history, then you should behave more responsibly. Keep acting recklessly, and you'll end up dead someday without understanding why."

“You can talk about my death all you want, but I have your protective barrier on me as long as you’re alive, don’t I? Doesn’t that mean we’ll die at the same time? Shouldn’t we just get married?” Oscar grinned.

“Don’t lump us together! I’m not marrying you!” Tinasha spat.

The barrier she had cast on Oscar was an extraordinary one that could protect him from all magical and physical attacks. While it had a few limitations and blind spots, it afforded every defense that magic could provide. So long as Tinasha was alive, the barrier on Oscar would remain intact, making it practically a cheat.

The witch rolled her eyes at the prince. “You need to learn your place. Here I am trying to break your curse, but it’ll all be pointless if you get yourself killed doing something else.”

As heir to his country, Oscar had a heavy burden on his shoulders. When he was but a child, he’d been cursed to be the end of his line by the Witch of Silence. The wicked spell cloaked any unborn child of his blood in such a powerful protective charm that no mother’s body could bear it. Overcoming such a mighty enchantment was quite the high hurdle, but Oscar had to if his lineage was to survive.

In pursuit of a way to do so, Oscar had completed the trials set by another witch so that she would break the curse for him. He’d braved the tower where it was said a witch granted a wish to all who climbed to the top, and he’d come back with Tinasha as his protector.

Oscar looked up at said mouthy protector. “Even if you don’t break the curse, you’re not affected by the Witch of Silence’s power, right? Just marry me and that’ll solve everything. When should we hold the wedding?”

“We have a contract for one year! You don’t have the right to extend it! And I’m almost done analyzing the curse!” Tinasha retorted.

“Weren’t you the one who went on and on about how difficult it’ll be to undo the spell? You’re so studious…,” Oscar commented.

“Of course I am. There’s no one else around who can do it. If you understood that, you’d know not to act so rashly. Now behave or I’ll curse you to never leave your desk.”

“It’d be too funny if I was cursed by two separate witches,” Oscar remarked before giving up and returning his attention to the stack of documents before him. Talking to Tinasha was entertaining, but he’d incur her resentment if he took it too far.

Contrary to the typical idea of what a witch was, Tinasha was so overly serious that it was adorable. It was no doubt due to that demeanor of hers that she was helping to break his curse, even though that wasn’t specified in their contract.

Tinasha had lived for so many years that she viewed solitude as natural, however, and didn’t form attachments to people. She was both incredibly kind and incredibly heartless.

At times, a terrible loneliness filled her eyes…and it made Oscar wish that she’d just stay with him forever. He wanted no more shadows to cast a

pall over her smiles. Over the past half a year, he had completely fallen for her.

“There’s no need to push yourself to finish the analysis so fast. After coming down from your tower for the first time in so long, you should enjoy things for a time,” Oscar urged. He wanted Tinasha to think of living peacefully with humans as something normal for her, and he wished she’d just while her days away like ordinary people did.

After tidying up the tea things, Tinasha turned back to him. “I want to do what I can while I can,” she stated, as if anticipating the end of the contract. She smiled, a faraway look in her eyes.

※

Farsas Castle employed close to fifty court mages. They spent their days researching and attending to magic-related task requests that came from all over the castle.

They were all generally excellent mages, even in comparison to mages from other countries, and reliably took care of most issues even if it required some time. There were the occasional requests that were beyond their capabilities, however. Ever since Tinasha had arrived at the castle, she’d been the one who handled such cases.

“So we’ve been asked to give our expert opinion on this magic implement but can’t identify exactly what it is…,” explained Kav the mage as he handed a dagger to Tinasha.

At present, there was no one else in the castle’s laboratory. A great number of reagents Kav was using for his own research had been left out on the lab table. Looking stumped, he awaited the witch’s assessment.

The old-looking dagger was encased in a copper sheath. Tinasha pulled it out and frowned. “You were told this is a magic implement?”

“Yes. Apparently, it was purchased as an antique at a secondhand shop in town, but it moves on its own and gets hot. That’s why we were asked to look into whether it’s ensorcelled… But while I do sense some sort of power from it, there’s no spell laid into the thing and it bears no carved sigils, either. I’m not sure what to make of it,” Kav said.

Tinasha turned the blade over, and sure enough, the dagger’s surface was bereft of etchings.

In order for a mage to imbue an object with a specific magical effect, the item in question must be given a carved sigil denoting a spell. Looking at that mark was the usual way of discerning what sort of power the enchanted object possessed.

This dagger had no such engraving, however, which was why Kav needed help.

Tinasha’s face was pinched as she said, “This isn’t a magic implement. It’s the result of a forbidden curse.”

“What? A forbidden curse? Wh-what part of it is?” Kav asked nervously.

“The effect itself isn’t particularly potent, but its origin is problematic. A human soul is sealed inside.”

“What?!”

Forbidden curses included things with problematic effects and tricky spell-casting processes. Anything involving a human sacrifice typically fell into the latter type.

Tinasha’s beautiful features twisted in disgust. “Souls are masses of power that naturally dissolve if they lose their frames—the body. This soul has been affixed to the dagger to prevent it from dispersing. But it wasn’t done by a very good mage. And just because a soul is sealed inside doesn’t mean the weapon is imbued with some sort of power. Most likely the soul will escape in time.”

“If that’s true, then that means this is…” Kav trailed off as he accepted the dagger back from the witch. Its time of creation was now clear.

Tinasha picked up on what Kav had left unspoken. “Not much time has passed since this object was made. We should find and catch whoever did this. Where is that secondhand shop?” she asked, her dark eyes flashing.

Her gaze was sharp and shone with a cold fury. Kav gulped.

Immediately, Tinasha frowned as she suddenly addressed someone standing behind Kav in the laboratory doorway. “Absolutely not. I’m not taking you.”

“No, I’m definitely going. I can’t just leave this alone after hearing all that,” came a deep, most definitely not childish voice. Kav whirled around and bowed to the man, who was standing in the doorway with an irritated look on his face.

When Tinasha caught sight of that expression, she merely threw her hands up in exasperation.

Kav led Tinasha and Oscar to a secondhand shop situated in a back alley of the town that encircled the castle.

Light entered through a small window and shone on various curiosities set out within the dim store. A motley assortment of goods including rusty bells, ancient horseshoes, keys and locks, kitchen utensils, and decorations were crammed onto shelves and stuffed into wooden boxes for display.

Oscar gawked with great interest at nearly everything around him, but Tinasha leaned against the wall with her arms crossed soon after entering. Seeing that the other two were loath to take the initiative, Kav had no choice but to address the shop owner. “Excuse me. We’ve come from the castle. We’re looking for the person who sold this.”

The owner was a man in the prime of life. He took one look at the questionable dagger’s scabbard and answered right away. “Oh, that? Someone traded that to pay off their loans. I’ve known the guy for about a decade, but it sounds like he’s gotten himself deep in debt this year. He borrowed money from a bunch of places and brought me this dagger to get the funds to pay it off. This isn’t anything special, but I did him a favor since I’ve known him so long.”

“What kind of man was this?” Oscar asked, a bronze key in hand. His voice carried well, and the shop owner glanced over at him but thankfully didn’t seem to suspect he was truly the crown prince.

“Just a regular guy. He’s got a wife and two little girls. Several times a year, he goes around the city selling wares. Oh, I recently found out he had a younger brother, though.”

“A brother?” Oscar inquired.

“Indeed. His brother was the one who came in to sell the daggers. Said he was holding on to the little things and an IOU.”

Tinasha, leaning against the wall, suddenly straightened up. She walked over to a box of items and pulled out two other daggers from it.

The owner’s eyes widened. “You’ve got a good eye, ma’am. He brought in those two along with a third—the one you’ve got. Apparently, it should’ve been a set of four, but…”

“…A twenty-five-year-old woman.”

“What?”

After unsheathing one of the short blades, Tinasha said something as though observing what others could not. The owner and Kav gaped at her. Pulling the other dagger from its sleeve, she said, “A thirty-one-year-old man.”

“Miss Tinasha, what are you…?”

Kav didn’t understand, but the shop owner seemed to have realized something. Stunned, he asked, “How do you know the ages of my friend and his wife? Can you tell the daggers’ former owners just from looking at them?”

“What? Former owner…?” Kav muttered as he quickly went pale.

What did her words indicate? The first of the three daggers had been discovered to house a human soul. It was easy to deduce why Tinasha looked at the daggers sold with it and stated the ages of a couple she shouldn’t have known.

Inside the first dagger was…

Kav stared at the blade in his hand.

Tinasha pointed to it with one pale finger. “A seven-year-old girl.”

Realizing that had to be one of the couple’s daughters, Kav fought down a scream with everything he had.

“Our suspect has to be the brother who sold the daggers. When he came here with the three blades, he must have already killed the mother, father, and daughter,” Oscar reasoned.

He and Tinasha were walking along an alley clustered with small houses on the outskirts of the Farsas castle city. They’d departed from the castle rather early in the day, so the sun was still high in the sky.

Oscar and Tinasha had sent Kav—still shell-shocked—back to the castle and headed to the house of the man who owed money. Consulting the map the shop owner drew for them, Oscar turned a corner.

“A set of four, huh? Which means the youngest daughter probably got involved, too,” he remarked.

Both of them were enraged at the idea of a three-year-old girl being made a sacrifice for a forbidden curse.

Tinasha tucked her long black hair behind one ear. “Experiments with forbidden curses like this one were quite common during the Dark Age. During that time, lives were treated with even less care than they are now. Unlike magical ability, which is determined at birth, all souls have a kind of power to them. It’s entirely natural that some stupid people started to think it could be harnessed and utilized.”

“Madness…,” Oscar said.

“This sort of thing happened a lot back then. The only thing that came from those horrible experiments was the conclusion that souls couldn’t really be used for anything. History has proven time and again that those who use forbidden curses will eventually fall prey to one themselves. There was nothing to gain by forcing souls into the daggers. Any amount of research would’ve made that apparent… That this man would still do something so depraved suggests he is not of sound mind.”

“Someone sane wouldn’t have sacrificed people to begin with,” said Oscar, patting Tinasha on the head.

Mages utterly despised forbidden curses, and it seemed this witch was no exception. In fact, perhaps because Tinasha was such a preeminent mage, she was even more upset than Kav about this situation.

As Oscar attempted to soothe the displeased witch at his side, he turned another corner. No sooner had he done so than he came upon the man’s home. It was a rather washed-out little place crammed tightly between its neighbors.

Oscar stared at the structure. “Those daggers were brought to the antique shop three days ago, right? Won’t that mean there’s no one here?”

“Even if their souls were sealed away, their bodies should’ve remained,” Tinasha explained.

“I was trying not to put it so bluntly…,” Oscar muttered.

“There’s no need for you to worry about upsetting me. I lived through the Dark Age, after all,” Tinasha insisted.

Judging from the exterior, the man’s house didn’t look lived in at all. They could see a simple kitchen through the glassless windows. Empty dishes sat atop a wooden table.

“Let’s start by taking a look around inside,” Oscar decided.

Just as he was about to go in, a man carrying a child popped out from the yard of a house two doors down. He must have been watching.

“Hey, the people in that house moved out three days ago,” he said.

“Oh yeah? Did you see if they had any kids with them?” Oscar asked. He didn’t bother speaking formally to a stranger, which did nothing to hide his high social status. Tinasha frowned slightly.

The man nodded, rocking the sleeping child against his shoulder. “They did. Two of them, in fact. The younger one’s close with my son, so he wanted to know where they were going so early in the morning.” The young man patted his child’s back.

Oscar and Tinasha exchanged glances. “That must mean something happened after they left the house,” deduced the former.

“In that case, we need to gather more eyewitness reports…,” Tinasha answered, snapping her fingers and pointing inside the house. “Oscar, have a look around inside the place.”

“What about you?”

“I’ll wait out here. When we get yelled at for this later, someone will have to provide an excuse for your recklessness.”

“That’s true. Lazar’s probably dying of a stomachache right about now,” Oscar remarked.

“And yet you snuck out anyway. Have you no compassion?” chided Tinasha. She frequently scolded Oscar herself and thus sympathized deeply with Lazar, Oscar’s childhood friend. Before she’d met Oscar, Lazar was the one who’d had to chase after him whenever he snuck from the safety of the castle. These days, that job fell to Tinasha. Lazar probably still got just as many stomachaches, but at least he enjoyed some reduction in hardship. If Oscar dared to point out such a thing, however, both Tinasha and Lazar would undoubtedly scold him.

“Well, I’m off, then. Don’t follow any strangers,” Oscar warned his beautiful protector.

“If you really think I’d do that, then finish up your tasks quickly…,” Tinasha replied, waving him off tiredly.

The prince turned toward the seemingly abandoned house. The man with the child appeared shocked to know that Oscar was about to intrude on someone else’s home. He beat a hasty withdrawal indoors, clearly thinking this wasn’t something he ought to get involved in.

Before the man with the child could retreat out of sight, however, a little girl poked her face out from the house across the way. She looked at the child in the man’s arms and called in an innocent voice…

“Ayla? Did you cut your hair? Who’s that?”

There was a moment of silence.

It was Oscar who responded the swiftest. He rolled to the side and grabbed the child before the man could escape. A fraction of a moment later, Tinasha seized the man by his neck with her ivory fingers.

Her nails very nearly cut into the man’s flesh. She looked up at him with dull, coal-black eyes. “It was you.”

“Don’t kill him, Tinasha,” Oscar demanded, the child in his arms limiting his movements. He’d have to put the child down to stop her, but the little girl was fast asleep. Upon closer inspection, it was obvious the child’s hair had been crudely cut to make her appear to be a boy.

The man struggled against Tinasha's hold on his throat. With a voice like the chill hand of death, the witch asked, "What were you doing with those daggers? Were you experimenting with different spells depending on the soul?"

"N-no…"

"Then were you practicing? The daughter's soul stuck to the weapon better than the mother's and the mother's more than the father's. Did you think the next one would go even better?"

"…Ngh, ah…"

The man's breathing grew faint, and he began thrashing around like a drowning man. The witch had silently lifted him off the ground, her jet-black hair swaying all around her.

The primal urge to kill was pouring off her in waves, dominating the surrounding atmosphere. Its ominous presence left not only the man but the girl who'd exposed him frozen in fear. The only one unaffected was Oscar, who said, "Are you listening, Tinasha? Don't kill him yet. I want to hear what he has to say."

"There's no point in letting him live. This man has magic."

"Did you decide to remain outside when you realized that?" Oscar posed. It'd struck him as strange that Tinasha had been so willing to let him out of her sight. It was hard to think she'd do that under normal circumstances. Evidently, she'd suspected the man of being the culprit from the very beginning.

Tinasha saw that the man was about to pass out and released her grip. He fell to the ground, coughing violently as he gasped for air. In a hoarse voice, he admitted, "I—I was trying to make a magic sword…for the future…"

"Save the cryptic remarks. What do you think you are, some lunatic from the Dark Age?" Tinasha's mocking retort seemed casual enough, but her eyes betrayed something darker than the desire to kill. Peering into them was to stare into an abyss that ran deeper than Tinasha herself.

Sensing a moment of opportunity, Oscar said, "Tinasha, trade places with me. I don't know how to hold a kid."

"You seem to be managing. Just keep doing what you're doing."

"Trade with me. I'll take over for you," insisted the prince, patting the witch's head with his free hand.

The warmth from his hand slowly spread through Tinasha, and she reluctantly received the young girl from him. She cradled the child against her shoulder.

As she held the sleeping kid, the witch suddenly appeared very kind, not unlike a regular person.

※

Resolving the case turned out to be an exercise in frustration.

Oscar frowned as he listened to a report of the culprit's testimony.

“A call for mages? Cuscull… Isn’t that the same new country that sent an envoy to invite Tinasha?”

“It is. It doesn’t look like they’re doing it openly, but they’ve proclaimed themselves open to all capable mages. This man resorted to murder trying to heed that call,” Kav explained, reading out the report and glancing to one side. His gaze fell to the crown prince’s protector. She was sitting on a couch with her legs crossed.

Despite having been furious and nearly killing the man, Tinasha now seemed a portrait of placid calm—on the surface anyway. Crossing her arms, she took over the report. “Though the invitation is for ‘capable mages,’ that can mean a great many things. It looks like Cuscull is trying to collect those who excel at warfare. I don’t know what they’re planning, but it doesn’t bode well that they’re inciting people to commit terrible acts.”

“A magic sword, huh? Mass production of such a weapon would not be good for us,” Oscar commented.

“Normal mages cannot produce magic swords. Almost all of them are fakes, with the exception of Akashia. A considerable amount of magic and a very complicated spell are both needed to fix a soul to an object. That’s why most cases have historically come about by accident,” Tinasha detailed.

“You’re saying it’s difficult to intentionally re-create such a process. Now that the challenge is out there, though, it’s likely to cause further trouble.”

While Oscar and Tinasha happened to uncover this one case, that didn’t mean they’d be able to bring in everyone who’d taken up the same offer.

“Idiots are out there doing things like this because they don’t know any better. Not knowing what they’re getting themselves into convinces them it’s worth pursuing… This is why, with time, people will repeat the same cycle of despair,” Tinasha snapped back coldly.

A sorrowful shadow fell over her dark eyes. Her words spoke to countless instances of lost hope witnessed over the many years of her life. Her gaze grew distant, as if she were reliving far-off memories. When she noticed Oscar and Kav’s eyes on her, she rose to her feet.

Clapping her hands to change the conversation, Tinasha said, “In any case, keep an eye out for any strange magical incidents and be sure to tell me about them. I’ll deal with any and all occurrences as best I can.”

“Yep. Kav, don’t go to her directly. Report to me first,” Oscar ordered.

“Why do you treat me like some bomb that could go off at any minute?!” Tinasha cried.

“Well, at least you’re aware of how dangerous you are,” Oscar quipped.

“You’re one to talk!” the witch protested, floating along the ceiling.

Kav was relieved to see her acting like her old self again.

He had to wonder how things would play out, however. What changes were lurking just beyond the veil of darkness?

Come what may, Kav had a feeling that true despair would be averted, so long as Oscar had Tinasha by his side.

2. Thinking of You

“Mages are dangerous, so don’t get close to them.”

This was a phrase mothers often said to their children. It was something kids heard from most adults.

Luly asked, “Aren’t they human, too?” only to get told, “They look human, but they’re filthy creatures who defy the gods.”

She was left to wonder what “filthy” meant… The young girl always had trouble with tough words. She knew enough to grasp that people would be angry if they found out her secret, so she visited the cabin discreetly.

Deep in the mountain was a small cottage where a wonderful magician lived. He could make flowers appear, and he healed Luly’s scrapes… When Luly first met him after getting lost one day, he gave her candy and led her back to the village where she lived.

Luly wanted to tell everyone about how nice the magician was, but she kept her mouth shut. This was her secret.

Her hands full of gathered berries, she was running off to the mountain cabin yet again.

Just before the little building came into view, Luly saw the magician himself barreling toward her on the path. As soon as he caught sight of her, he ran over and scooped the young girl up in his arms. “Thank goodness. I was so worried. I didn’t think I’d make it!”

“What’s wrong? Make what?” Luly asked, thinking that her friend was acting strange. He was very pale and completely flustered. She didn’t understand why. The magician merely offered the girl a weak smile.

“It’s nothing. Come, let’s get you inside.”

“But I have to go right back today. It’s my mom’s birthday,” Luly said.

“No! You can’t go back to the village!” he cried.

“…Why?”

The magician didn’t answer. Normally, he was always smiling. This was the first time Luly had ever seen the man so close to tears. “Hide out here for a while, then flee to another country. Run as far away as you can… All the way to Farsas if need be.”

“What…? I can’t do that. I have my mom and my dad.”

Why was he saying this to her?

Suddenly, Luly felt very worried. Shaking off the magician's grip on her, she ran back the way she had come.

"No, Luly! You can't go back there!" he shouted, scrambling after her. However, she kept running.

Luly ran and ran, until she arrived at a spot that overlooked the village below…

…and saw her hometown engulfed in flames.

"That really takes me back," said a young man watching the white smoke rise from verdant hills and drift beyond the distant forest.

His snow-white hair was tied up in a long queue. The young man's delicate, doll-like features gave him an odd countenance—as though something was missing.

He watched the smoke dissolve into the sky.

"I was born in the Dark Age, you see. Only once did my father ever take me outside the country. That's where I saw people and towns on fire, just like this. It really was a terrible era." Despite describing great tragedy, the man's voice was indifferent and bereft of emotion. Even the words *a terrible era* were as plain and ordinary as if he'd been describing what he had for dinner last night. The mages accompanying him, however, all looked upon their lord with eyes full of admiration.

"Lord Lanak, you should return to the castle."

"Ah, I suppose it's about that time. Yes, I still have many things to do," replied the white-haired man apparently named Lanak. He tore his eyes from the billowing smoke and turned his gaze to the contingent of mages before him. As calm as one could ever be, he continued, "Since we've gone through the trouble of setting fire to the village, we'll need to send a proper declaration of war. Not doing so would be an insult to those who lost their lives today."

There was no sarcasm in his words acknowledging the people he'd killed himself. He appeared to feel true pity for the dead but quickly broke into a bright smile. "This is the dawn of a new era for this land. To that end, we've got to reset everything for a fresh start. First up is the Four Great Nations, I believe? If they're destroyed, all the others will fall obediently into line from there."

Lanak held out his abnormally pale hands. A transportation array appeared, though he had said no incantation. With a final smile, he vanished. The burning village was left behind, unaware of the one responsible for its fate.

All that remained was ash and a lingering smell of burnt human flesh that drifted on the lukewarm breeze.

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The sky above the castle was clear and sunny. However, thick ash-gray clouds hung low in the distance to the north.

Standing atop the castle walls, Tinasha held out a hand to her familiar who'd come from the direction of the approaching gloom. The gray, cat-shaped familiar leaped onto her shoulder and rubbed its head against her cheek.

This familiar had been making the rounds all across the continent for hundreds of years. Recently, its excursions had been limited to the newly minted nation of Cuscull.

"I see. So it's true… Why now, after four hundred years…?" Tinasha murmured, distress crossing her lovely face as she received her familiar's report.

Truthfully, she wanted to leave and make for Cuscull immediately.

The very thing that had driven her to become a witch had at last come to pass. It was nearly within Tinasha's grasp, and she wanted to reach out and put an end to everything as soon as possible. It clawed at her so ceaselessly that Tinasha felt liable to go mad.

Based on what she'd learned, however, things were still too complicated and dangerous for her to act on emotion now. If she made a wrong move, countless other countries would get involved and the death toll would be astronomical. Even if one quick move could bring an end to the troubles she had endured for so long, Tinasha couldn't ignore the potential mass loss of life.

"What should I do…?" she wondered aloud, putting a hand to her chin and falling into thought. The cat on her shoulder perked its ears up.

"…What is that? Your pet?" came a voice.

"Oscar…"

The prince was approaching along a castle rampart walkway. He gingerly picked up the cat. Its black eyes went round and wide at the sudden appearance of an unfamiliar man.

Paying no mind to the animal's reaction, Oscar scratched under its chin as he looked at Tinasha.

If it were him in my position, what choice would he make given the situation?

After half a year of observing Oscar at work, Tinasha knew he was an exceptionally clever statesman. She knew that he cared for the safety of others and that he'd undoubtedly answer the call if asked to help.

More than anything, Tinasha knew he was fond of her.

He'd once told her that as everything around her changed, he alone would not.

If she was allowed to take his hand and make a request…

"Tinasha? What is it?" Oscar frowned, the cat now resting on top of his head. Concerned, the prince's blue eyes were trained on the witch. Tinasha held her breath for a moment as an impulse to tell him everything swept over her…

She knew she could never tell anyone about her past transgressions, however.

Tinasha stuffed down the emotions churning inside her like warm mud and smiled at the young man.

"…It's nothing. And that isn't a real cat; it's my familiar."

"It is? Wow, it feels exactly like a real one," Oscar remarked.

"It's made with magic, just like Litola. And don't put the cat on your head; you might startle someone. You're supposed to be a prince," Tinasha scolded, snapping her fingers lightly. In response, the cat jumped over to her shoulders, and she whispered in its ear.

"You go rest now. Thanks for all your hard work."

Those words released the familiar from hundreds of years of service. The gray cat stared at her, then its head slowly lolled.

Abruptly, it dissolved into gray powder and blew away.

Oscar boggled at the sudden turn of events. "Was that really okay? Did it just cease to exist?"

"Yes, it did, but it's all right. It's done its duty for me many times over by now," Tinasha replied. In many ways, the cat was a representation of Tinasha's own illusions, but she didn't need it anymore. Tinasha didn't need to involve anyone besides herself. That's why she chose not to draw Oscar into any of this, either.

Her relationship with him was nothing more than what the contract dictated. She was his protector and would keep him safe. The agreement said nothing of the reverse.

Tinasha closed her eyes to conceal the shadowy look in them. She took a few seconds to get her emotions in order. Once the worst of her tumultuous feelings had passed, she put a pretty smile back on her face. "Besides, I'm busy right now cracking your curse," she said.

Her analysis of the curse was nearing a conclusion.

After that, all she had to do was compose a spell to break the curse. It was likely to be extremely complex, so she'd sent away for crystals to make magic implements infused with spells ahead of time. Upon reflection, Tinasha realized she'd kept Oscar waiting quite a while, but at last the goal was in sight. She was certain she'd end his curse and positive he'd be pleased.

Tinasha grinned up at Oscar, and he smiled back. "About that, don't forget you also have the option of marrying me. That's what I'd personally recommend."

"You're about the only one who would." Tinasha snorted.

"Isn't my recommendation all that matters? What other opinion do you need?"

"Mine for one! Listen to what I want here!" Tinasha cried.

The two had a way of getting off track and going on and on like this forever.

Tinasha started to leave him behind, but he grabbed her hand and turned her back around. She could feel in his grip his strong desire not to let her get away, and she looked back at him.

“…What is it? Don’t even think about sneaking out like you did before. You’ve got too much to do.”

“No, not that. The dress I ordered for you is ready for a first fitting, so I came to find you.”

“What…?”

The dress Oscar was referring to was one he’d ordered on his own when a cloth merchant had visited the castle three months ago.

The ones Tinasha ordered herself had been of a simple design, so they’d been completed much earlier. The fact that Oscar’s had taken so long gave Tinasha an uneasy sense of foreboding.

“I—I suppose refusing won’t do me any good.”

“You’ve got that right. Would you rather walk there on your own or be dragged? Up to you,” Oscar offered.

“I’ll go…”

The longer Tinasha lived in the castle, the more things she had to do seemed to naturally accumulate.

Hanging her head in resignation, Tinasha let Oscar lead her along by the hand.

“It’s sooooo gorgeous, Miss Tinasha!” Sylvia cried out, though it sounded more like a shriek of glee. She was the first person to see Tinasha come out wearing the dress.

Oscar looked Tinasha over from head to toe. Rather candidly, he complimented her. “Looks pretty damn good.”

“Thank you…,” Tinasha said.

The dress was finely crafted of smooth black silk woven with abundant silver threads. It was open at her arms and back, hugging her curves close from the high collar to down below her waist. From the knee, the hem flared out in a beautiful arc. Flowers embroidered in silver thread bloomed all over the fabric. Against the witch’s porcelain skin and jet-black hair, it looked perfect. All who beheld Tinasha were utterly entranced, unconsciously sighing in admiration.

Sylvia gazed at the witch, spellbound. “Miss Tinasha, let me do your hair and makeup on the big day.”

“The big day? What big day?”

“It’s almost His Majesty the King’s birthday celebration, of course,” Sylvia reminded her.

“I know that’s coming up, but why should I go? Isn’t it just a ball being held for diplomatic purposes?” asked Tinasha.

As the two women discussed this, Oscar circled Tinasha to inspect the dress’s craftsmanship. Once talk turned to the ball, an evil smile spread over his face. “You’re the one who’s gotta go. Jump right into the lion’s den and get some experience socializing with humans.”

“Why?!” Tinasha asked, indignant.

Rather timidly, the dressmaker spoke up for the first time, asking, “Um… how is the fit?”

Instead of Tinasha answering, Oscar piped up happily from behind her. “It’s a little loose in the waist. Did you lose weight? You should make sure you get proper sleep.”

“I am. When I feel like it,” Tinasha informed him.

“And could you make a hair ornament in the same shape as the flowers on the dress but a little bigger?”

“Yes, Your Highness,” answered the dressmaker, quickly marking the waist measurements on the fabric and retiring from the room. Oscar dropped a fond kiss on Tinasha’s shoulder. Sylvia blushed as she observed it, but Tinasha bore it calmly, a look of clear mental exhaustion on her face.

Oscar noticed her expression and lifted his head with a look of displeasure. “You’re really not affected the littlest bit.”

“I can’t react when you touch me so brazenly.”

“Is that the problem?” Oscar asked.

“Is that not what it is?” Tinasha shot back, failing to understand and staring at him with some confusion.

The prince rolled his eyes. “You don’t see me as a man at all, do you?”

“Of course I don’t. Though it’s more like I don’t see anyone in such a way,” Tinasha clarified.

Silently, Oscar balled his hands into fists and ground them against the sides of the witch’s head.

“Ow, ow, ow! What do you think you’re doing? Honestly now!” Tinasha cried.

“Sorry, I just got annoyed,” Oscar explained.

Tinasha glared at the man while rubbing her temples. He seemed entirely unaffected, however, even grinning. Once more, he inquired of his romantically apathetic protector, “Why are you like this? Is it because purity is so important to spirit sorcerers?”

“I think that’s part of it, but I also don’t want to get too close to humans. Lucrezia is much calmer nowadays, but in the past, she used to take revenge for getting dumped by magically moving all the water in a village’s lake to a different location. Observing things like that always made me feel reluctant to get involved with anyone… Oh, and I put the water back, of course.”

Sylvia was frozen stiff, and Oscar had fallen silent, too.

Getting involved with a witch certainly did risk angry outbursts on an entirely different scale. Suddenly, the most powerful witch’s aversion to love affairs seemed a very wise decision indeed.

Even then, one couldn’t deny that Tinasha was exceedingly awkward with humans. She appeared aloof as long as she kept people at a certain distance, but once anyone got to know her, they quickly realized how unaccustomed she was with socializing.

That was likely why Tinasha was so apathetic, even to herself. Shaking his head, Oscar patted Tinasha’s hair. She looked up at him, perplexed.

“Well, let’s put a pin in that. I’m an exception, so think of me as something different.”

“Really?” Tinasha asked.

“Really. We’ve got half a year left, so I’ll wait until then.”

“Hold on. I don’t think this is something that just needs a little more time…,” Tinasha protested frankly, but Oscar paid the remark no mind and merely grinned. The hand on her head slid down to caress her cheek.

“I’m pretty confident that you’ll change your mind. I suit you.”

“…I really don’t understand,” Tinasha said, shaking her head. Her dark eyes seemed to search the air for something invisible.

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“So shall it be defined by me.”

At those words, crystal balls no larger than one’s fingernail began to float in the air. A dozen spheres glided slowly as if guided on wires. Each lazily came to rest in place on the red lines that delineated the spell.

Tinasha made sure they were all in their proper spots before beginning her incantation.

“I pray that these words will turn to poison. Let them sow seeds of thorns.”

Her voice sang out the words. As the infinitely complex spell took shape, her mind wandered.

If love could kill someone, then was that feeling in and of itself a contradiction?

Whether a person killed out of love or out of hate, it brought on death all the same.

Why then did humans treat them as totally different things?

Only the one who killed could know the truth of their motive, and even they couldn’t be absolutely sure.

Sweat beaded on her ivory forehead.

Cautious and precise, Tinasha wove together her power and her intention.

“Fate goes round in a loop, impossible to escape.”

Each line made the air vibrate, and the crystal balls rotated accordingly.

“No one shall touch it nor change it. Let my words turn to poison.”

People kill people.

That’s what emotions do.

That’s what power does.

If strong feelings could push Tinasha toward such vile actions, then she would avoid love and hate. She didn’t want to ever remember.

At the same time, Tinasha didn’t want to push herself to insanity. From the very start, she was already caught in the midst of an inescapable madness, after all.

“Blessings born of hatred, love born of a curse…”

Partway through a lengthy incantation, Tinasha let out a little sigh.

She tipped her head up to stare at the dark ceiling…then closed her eyes.

Failure wasn't an option. The witch was already running low on time.

She was sure there was nothing else someone who dwelled in the past—someone like her—could leave behind.

That was why she was so determined to at least accomplish this one task.

Honing her thoughts down to a single thread, Tinasha launched back into chanting the spell.

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Oscar felt like he'd been dreaming.

It was a very fuzzy sort of vision. He didn't know whether he felt happy or sad, but he awoke with the distinct feeling that his dream had been very emotional. The room was still dark, and only the earliest hints of morning were visible through the window.

Rubbing his forehead, he moved to sit up in bed and noticed something strange. He wasn't wearing a shirt.

"Did I not wear one to bed…?" Oscar murmured, scrolling through his memories even though his thoughts were still muddled… Then he noticed someone next to him.

His witch was asleep, seated on the floor, with her torso slumped over his bed. Several crystal balls were scattered all around her.

Something had clearly happened, but Oscar didn't have the foggiest idea what it was.

Sitting up, he reached out and tugged gently on the witch's hair. "Tinasha," he called.

No reaction. He tugged again, and she finally stirred. She gazed at him with bleary eyes. "I'm sleepy…"

"You can sleep after you've explained what happened," Oscar insisted. Tinasha shook her head like a petulant child. As she gradually came back to her senses, however, the light came back to her eyes. She let out a little yawn and sat on the bed.

Looking up at Oscar with her dark eyes, Tinasha declared, "I broke your curse."

"…What?"

Oscar stared at his protector. Dumbfounded, he found himself questioning his own ears.

Tinasha rubbed at her watery eyes. "Technically speaking, I didn't break it so much as I set up another curse in the same location to offset it. There's a part of the spell with a name attached to it… It's like a password. Only the spell caster designated by that name can do anything about it, so I left it in there. But if that's all it is, then it's just part of the blessing and protection charm, so there shouldn't be any ill effects."

“…You broke the curse already?” Oscar was stunned by the sudden turn of events.

He knew that Tinasha had been nearly done with analyzing the curse, but now it was seemingly gone altogether. Oscar had borne the burden for fifteen years. That it was neutralized with so little fanfare left him at a loss for words.

Blinking her sleep-heavy eyelids, Tinasha pointed at Oscar’s chest. “You can wash that off now. Go take a bath or something.”

Now that she mentioned it, Oscar realized there were intricate sigils drawn in blood on his body. They looked magical and were still a vibrant red.

“Is that your blood?” Oscar asked.

“It is. I used it as a catalyst,” answered Tinasha.

“Why did you do it while I was asleep?”

“Because it was easier with you unconscious. You kicked up a fuss when I waited for you to fall asleep the last time,” Tinasha reminded him, floating up into the air. “Okay, I’m going to head back to my room for some sleep…”

She was about to teleport away when Oscar suddenly grabbed her hand. Frowning a little, she looked down at him. “What?”

“Ah, just… Thank you.”

At that, a bewitching smile reached Tinasha’s sleepy eyes. She squeezed his hand in return, placing a kiss on the back of it. Then she faded away like a ghost, leaving only the crystal balls scattered about the floor.

Oscar gazed down for a better look at the blood sigils painted on his body.

He was certain that for the rest of his days he’d never forget this morning.

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The entire castle was abuzz with excitement.

Today was the king’s birthday, though the festivities were more of an opportunity for state diplomacy than anything else. People from neighboring countries gathered to sound out one another’s intentions. As the celebration was about to begin in earnest, a group of court ladies were getting ready in a room of the castle.

“How’s everything look?” Oscar, dressed in full court regalia himself, knocked on the open door before entering.

The witch looked up at the sound of his voice. “Oscar… I’m exhausted…”

She’d been held fast for two hours while her hair and makeup were done. She longed to get free, but Sylvia and the other court ladies were having too much fun and wouldn’t let her go. Whether Oscar actually heard the witch’s plea for help was unknown, as he was staring at her in awe.

“You look…stunning.”

“What’s that supposed to mean…?” Tinasha grumbled.

“I put my whole heart and soul into it! She was already beautiful, so it made the perfect base for makeup,” Sylvia piped up. Upon hearing that, Tinasha judged the makeup session to be over and stood at last.

Her long hair was bound up, though a few wispy locks trailed down in front. The floral hair ornament that matched the embroidery on the dress sat perched above her ear. Silk gauze around the flower trailed down over her alabaster shoulders.

Makeup in hues of blue had been applied to accentuate her already prominent nose bridge and big dark eyes. As a result, her normally cool and clear features took on the proud, intimidating air of a queen. Coupled with her youthful face, this rendered her entirely unapproachable.

“You did a great job. Completely exceeded my expectations,” Oscar said, very pleased. He reached out to brush Tinasha’s cheek.

Suddenly, Lazar’s voice came echoing down the hall. “Your Highness! Where are you?”

“What is it? What’s wrong?” Oscar asked. Lazar heard him and rushed into the room. He looked appropriately gobsmacked when he caught sight of Tinasha. Oscar didn’t turn to look at his old friend, as he was entirely preoccupied with the witch. Instead, the prince merely asked again, “What’s wrong?”

“Ah yes. Well, the prince from Tayiri won’t be able to attend, it seems. There was an attack on a town close to the border with Cuscull about a week ago. In his place, he’s sent his royal younger sister.”

“Cuscull?”

“Attack…?”

Oscar and Tinasha’s faces hardened at Lazar’s words.

With a grave tone, the man continued his explanation. “Without warning, Cuscull mages burned a village to the ground. By the time help had arrived, no survivors could be found.”

“No survivors… They killed everyone?” Oscar inquired.

Not in the past one hundred years had there been something so vile. Mass killings of innocent citizens had been commonplace during the Dark Age, but it was the Age of Witches now. Most thought such a tragedy impossible unless one of the witches was involved.

Bile rose in Oscar’s throat. “I have no idea what Cuscull is thinking. I’ve also got to wonder if Tayiri plans to publicize the attack and ask other countries for assistance.”

“They might. If Tayiri could handle this on its own, a nation of mages who oppose Tayiri’s state religion would never have declared independence in the first place. I’m sure those in charge want to do something about Cuscull, whether that means incurring debts to other nations or not,” Tinasha replied.

“True. Fighting mages when your nation shuns the practice of magic sounds difficult,” Oscar observed.

Mages have great power in war but are actually quite difficult to utilize efficiently.

The stronger the spell, the more likely it is to affect soldiers on the mage's side, too, and the longer the incantation as well.

It was hard to control large-scale magic at all, and few mages mastered the delicate practice. What's more, the farther away a spell was loosed, the more time an enemy mage had to counter it. Mages needed to be able to get fairly close to their opponents if they wanted to have any hope of outsmarting them by being the first to cast a spell. As a result, spell casters were placed in the rear guard behind soldiers and typically lobbed small- to midrange magic attacks. Opposing magic users would attempt to guard while hurling back spells of their own. Such a task was exceedingly difficult and was the exact reason so many mages devoted themselves entirely to defense and support magic.

Tayiri was an exception, as they had no mages and therefore no way of defending themselves against a volley of spells.

One had to wonder what Cuscull's aim was in all this. Whether it was revenge against Tayiri for so many years of oppression or something else entirely, none could say for sure.

Oscar frowned, then noticed that something seemed off about the witch. The blood had drained from her face. Her eyes were glinting with a mixture of grief and rage.

"Tinasha? What is it?" Oscar asked, and she snapped back to herself.

Her eyes wavered as she looked up at him. "…Oh, no… It's nothing," she said, smiling. Then, after some hesitation, she tugged on his sleeve. "Um, do you have some time? There's something I'd like to talk to you about…"

"Oh? This is unusual. Sure, I don't mind," Oscar agreed.

Knowing her, this wasn't going to be anything romantic. Instead of making everyone clear the room, Oscar led Tinasha out onto the balcony. Beyond the railing sprawled the castle courtyard. Oscar glanced idly at the plants and flowers shadowed in the dusk. Tinasha followed him out, shutting the door behind her.

"Oscar, do you like Nark?" she asked.

"Huh? Nark… You mean that dragon of yours? I mean, I guess I don't hate it. Why?"

"Then could I ask you to look after it? I'm its current owner, but I'd like to transfer that over to you. It's fond of you, too…"

"Why?" Oscar pressed.

Tinasha didn't answer. She just looked up at him with a pained expression. The dissonance between the look and Tinasha's fanciful hair and makeup lent her an air of instability. It was unusual for the witch to appear so helpless, and Oscar scratched his head. "All right. I don't mind."

"Really?! I'll transfer it over now, then," Tinasha decided, breaking into a broad smile. Without a sound, she floated into the air and placed her palm

to Oscar's forehead and hummed an incantation. He caught her in his arms, and she settled into them.

"Now, you're its owner. It'll come when you call its name. You don't have to worry about food; it'll find some on its own."

"Got it." Oscar nodded.

She was radiant when she smiled. The moonlight tinted her ivory skin a pale-blue shade. Her gaze appeared to be on him, but her attention was far away—perhaps linked with the night itself. With the distinct feeling that he'd get utterly swept away if he looked at her for too long, Oscar bit back a sigh.

He stroked Tinasha's cheek with his other hand, and her eyes narrowed. He slid his hand over to the back of her head, drawing her close.

She didn't resist. She placed her hands on his shoulders and then kissed him quite naturally.

When her soft lips drew back, Oscar huffed out a laugh. "That was not what I was expecting."

"You have to change things up every so often," Tinasha replied with a smile, reaching out a finger to wipe off the lipstick that had stuck to Oscar's lips.

When Oscar entered the ballroom accompanied by the witch, the pair looking as beautiful as a painting; all eyes turned to stare at them. Aware of the wave of murmurs sweeping across the room, Tinasha sighed to herself. Her arm looped through Oscar's, and she whispered to him, "It's unheard of for me to make an appearance in a place like this…"

"No one knows who you are," Oscar assured her.

"If you refer to me as your fiancée, I *will* send you flying."

"I'll remember that," he acknowledged dryly.

They made their way to the king and bowed. Tinasha took a step back, and Oscar offered his official well wishes. The king eyed the two of them with some amusement, and when Oscar finished his address, the king beckoned Tinasha closer. She came to the king's side, and he lowered his voice so that only she could hear him.

"You're going along with this well," he said.

"It's only because I signed a contract with someone very pushy… Is your family known for such things?"

"Since you've graced us with your presence, shall I introduce you to the guests?"

"Please, no. I believe the noble young ladies of the neighboring countries have been awaiting a meeting with the crown prince."

Upon hearing that, the king swept his gaze over the ballroom and picked out the ladies in gorgeous gowns who studded the hall. Each was staring at Oscar with anticipation and at the witch with hostility.

The king chuckled. "That does look tricky. My sympathies."

"I see writing things off as someone else's problem runs in the family… I wish you'd do something about him."

“At his age, he isn’t going to listen to his father. You should just go ahead and get together with him.”

“You’re really going to say that, too?” Tinasha cried out without thinking; then her hand flew to cover her mouth. She hurriedly curtsied and returned to Oscar’s side.

“What were you talking about?” he asked her, suspicious.

“The troubles of life…”

Oscar looked like he wanted to hear more, but Tinasha refused to speak further. She spent an hour with Oscar at the ball; then when the timing was right, she escaped out into the gardens.

“I’m so tired…and so glad this dress isn’t for dancing…” Tinasha sighed, savoring her freedom as she glanced back at the ball with everyone in their finery. The witch could dance, of course, but she had a feeling that doing so would invite unwanted trouble. She was about to slip away when someone called out to her from behind.

“Are you all alone, beautiful?”

“Gah…”

The disgusting catcall made Tinasha screw her face up, but she schooled her features into a smile before turning around. Standing before her was a well-groomed young man. He must have been a guest at the ball.

She replied blandly, “Just out for some night air…”

“That’s perfect. I just came out to do the same myself,” he said, striding up to her and taking her hand rather naturally. “If it’s all the same, I’d like to accompany you.”

“Mmm…” Tinasha sighed. She’d missed her chance to escape. Now she had to render this person unconscious without leaving any proof behind.

As he caressed her hand and Tinasha began to wonder if she could just bury him in the gardens, someone appeared from one of the side paths. This man noticed the two of them and gave a little snort. He said to her, “Miss Tinasha, are you about ready?”

“Ah yes. I’m coming,” she said, shaking off the man’s hand as fast as she could and scurrying away after excusing herself. The man looked reluctant to let her go, but she didn’t spare one glance back at him as she hurried to Als.

“Thanks. I was about to knock him into next week.”

“I have to admit, that was funny to see. But, well, I suppose it’s part of my guard duties to protect you from unsavory men like that,” young General Als declared, laughing loud and long.

Annoyed, Tinasha wiped off her poor abused hand. “It was really awful. I don’t want people groping at me like they have permission to do so. He was much too familiar.”

“True, although you don’t seem to mind when it’s the prince.”

“…Huh?” Tinasha paused in confusion when Als pointed that out; she’d never noticed it herself.

When Oscar touched her like it was the most natural thing in the world, she'd often thought his hands felt warm or comfortable—but never unpleasant. At most, she'd found Oscar's caress distracting.

She wondered what the difference meant but gave up on it halfway through her thoughts. Even if she got an answer, it didn't matter anymore.

She shook it off only to suddenly feel uneasy all over. Her skin prickled.

"Someone's watching."

"Huh? Miss Tinasha, did you say something?"

"…No."

The disquieting sensation disappeared in an instant. There was no one else around but Als and Tinasha.

The witch tipped her head up. She gazed at the moon, as if searching for something she'd been longing for.

Back in his chambers, Oscar was lounging in a chair, feeling entirely fed up. *What in the world do I do now?* he thought.

Sitting in front of him was one very prideful princess in a brilliant gown.

"Your Highness, what's wrong?" inquired Princess Cecelia of Tayiri, who was attending in place of her elder brother. She looked at Oscar with eyes plainly filled with hope.

Oscar had struck up a conversation with her in order to ask about the Cuscull situation, but Cecelia had said, "It's very complicated, so I can't discuss it here" and invited herself to his private chambers.

Now that she had gotten Oscar alone, however, Cecelia refused to discuss any matters related to Cuscull. From the look of things, she knew nothing of politics, though perhaps she was tasked with making an ally of the power behind the throne of an influential country—or just seducing Oscar.

"…Time to kick her out," Oscar muttered under his breath and got to his feet. Just then, there was a light rap at the window. On reflex, Oscar called, "What is it, Tinasha?"

The witch opened the window and entered, then looked shocked to see Cecelia there. Oscar was prepared for Tinasha to react in a dramatic fashion, but instead she turned calmly to face the princess.

"I am so very sorry, but I need to borrow him for some important business. I hope that's all right with you," Tinasha said very politely but in a manner that brooked no objections.

Cecelia did not take the imposition well. "I never… How very rude to come in from a place like that! Your Highness, just who is this woman?"

"My wi—mage," Oscar replied, correcting himself just before the word *witch* could escape from his mouth. When Cecelia, the princess of a country that hated magic, heard that, her eyebrows flew up. She leaped to her feet and brazenly stepped right in front of Tinasha, glaring into her deep, dark eyes.

"A mage, was it? A mere mage who doesn't know her place… How filthy. Begone!" she haughtily decreed.

Before Oscar could reply, Tinasha coolly spat, “A mere mage? You should watch your mouth, you imbecile.”

“What did you call me?!”

“Leave. Do I have to repeat myself before you understand?”

The witch’s eyes were like two pools of bottomless black—a silent gravity that dominated the entire room.

Cecelia shrank back, cowed by the intensity of her gaze. Oscar gaped at the witch in numb shock.

He had seen Tinasha look fearsome and intimidating before, but never had he seen her with eyes that could force others to submit so completely.

Oscar himself possessed that same ability. His eyes were that of someone who stood above the rest—a ruler.

Cecelia looked at Oscar imploringly, but once she realized no help would be coming from him, she all but fled the room. Only the witch and Oscar were left.

It seemed to Oscar that Tinasha in formal wear was an entirely different person—someone he didn’t know.

Tinasha slowly turned around and approached Oscar. There was an irrepressible self-deprecating look in her eyes.

“Tinasha?”

With a smile, she placed a finger to his lips, indicating that he shouldn’t speak. She lifted off into the air and gave a light wave of her right hand. Blood started to ooze from her pointer finger.

Then she wrapped both arms around Oscar’s neck and began to write something in blood behind his left ear. As she concentrated on her work, she whispered something in the prince’s ear.

“Oscar… I am someone who should have died four hundred years ago… At present, I am only a witch. I am nothing more than the remains of a child who should be dead. You should not fall for a dead woman.”

She finished writing and cradled Oscar’s face in her hands. From very close, she gazed into his eyes the color of a clear twilight sky.

“You should do what you need to do. The future of this country is riding on your shoulders. Don’t forget that.”

The darkness within Tinasha’s gaze was akin to stepping into the abyss.

A baseless anxiety seized Oscar.

“Tinasha? What’s going on?” he pressed.

She closed her eyes and shook her head. Then she looked at him again and parted her red lips. “Do you remember what I said…when I undid Lucrezia’s spell?”

Oscar’s eyes widened.

She didn’t wait for his reply. Her face came closer, pale and twisted in sorrow. She kissed him softly on the lips.

Then she landed soundlessly on the ground and turned her back to him. The air in front of her—where her dark gaze now focused—warped.

In the next moment, an unfamiliar man materialized from the twisted space.

The man’s long white hair was the shade of melting snow, and his skin was similarly pale.

The light blue mage’s costume that clung to his lithe body looked remarkably similar to the one Tinasha often wore. This man with an air of androgyny to him gazed at Tinasha and smiled. “Aeti, I’ve come for you. You’ve grown so much bigger…ah, lovelier.”

At that, Oscar wanted to shout out. But when he tried, he found that his voice had been silenced. No matter how he tried, his body refused to move, too. That kiss just now had bound him with magic.

Tinasha suddenly leaped off the floor and launched herself at the man. She threw her arms around his neck and hugged him. “Lanak! You really are alive!”

Oscar had never heard Tinasha’s voice sound so full of pure joy.

The man she’d called Lanak stroked her hair fondly. “I knew you were looking for me. But I couldn’t do anything for so long…”

“It’s all right. It’s enough just to know you’re okay.”

Tinasha took the man’s hand and cradled it against her face. Seeing the witch act so unusually shook Oscar to the core. Tears were glistening in her eyes, and her happiness was palpable. He was well aware that this wasn’t the smile she used as a mask. Who was this man who inspired such feelings in her?

Lanak smiled at Tinasha, apparently taking no notice at all of Oscar. “You won’t have to feel lonely anymore. I’ve built you a country, too. It’s called Cuscull. It’s small, but it’s going to grow quickly. I’m certain you’ll like it. You’re going to be its queen.”

That left Oscar reeling.

Cuscull, the newly formed country of mages.

This dangerous-looking man before him was the king of that country?

Tinasha answered him with a tone of rapture, not sounding the littlest bit perturbed. “If it’s my country, I’m going to make lots of requests.”

“Request away. It’s your right,” Lanak replied, wrapping his left arm around her. Noticing Oscar for what seemed to be the first time, he asked, “Who’s he?”

“The man I signed a contract with,” Tinasha explained.

“The bearer of Akashia, hmm? Sounds dangerous,” Lanak said, facing Oscar and making a motion with his right hand.

Tinasha saw it, and for a second, her expression twisted. The spell binding Oscar broke.

Wasting no time, Oscar tried to unsheathe Akashia, but Tinasha leaped in front of Lanak and gave the man a smile. “Let him go. Even if the sword has power, it’s just a sword in the end. It means nothing if the bearer has no strength of their own.”

“Tinasha!”

Oscar felt like he was trapped in some awful dream.

His witch, the person he should’ve known better than anyone, now felt terribly far away from him.

Where had her heart gone?

Slowly, Tinasha turned around. An unmistakable belligerence blazed in her dark eyes.

“My contract with you ends tonight. The curse is broken. You don’t need anything more from me, I believe.”

“There’s still time left on it,” he said.

“Not anymore,” she said, a cruel smile flickering across her face.

Oscar finally drew Akashia. He pointed the tip of it just past Tinasha. “I’m not letting you leave with him.”

“If you intend to hurt Lanak, you’ll have to go through me.”

Tinasha spread her arms wide, and a longsword materialized between them. She grabbed hold of it.

In an instant, there was a terrible pressure about the room.

Oscar did his best to stay calm. His mind was reeling from a chaotic mess of questions.

At this distance, he was confident he could kill Tinasha.

While she was touted as the most powerful witch, that met its match against Akashia.

Tinasha was the one who’d trained Oscar so that he could kill her, after all. However, even knowing that, the prince found it difficult to take a single step forward.

He was of two minds—the desire to focus on battle and the desire to reject it.

Time froze where it was, and there was a horrible silence that seemed to go on forever. Then Lanak embraced Tinasha from behind. “It’s all right. Let’s go.”

She gave a tight-lipped smile and nodded. Magic enveloped the two of them.

“Tinasha!” Oscar shouted, but she had already winked out of sight.

3. When the Abyss Formed

“Aeti, you’re going to be my queen. Do you know that?”

“Yeah… I know,” the little girl said, nodding hesitantly. The boy’s face changed from stern to smiling in an instant. That sweet smile reassured Tinasha somewhat.

She hadn’t intended to do anything bad. She’d just had a fit of anger, and her magic had leaked out and shattered a flower vase in the room. Startled, the court ladies called over the boy, who had stopped by rather coincidentally.

Tinasha felt devastated that the one person she didn’t want to learn of her failure had discovered it.

He was the only one she didn’t want to hate her. She’d been alone here for as long as she could remember. In a sense, the boy was the only family she had who thought of her and helped her.

Tinasha clenched her fingers in the hem of her dress. The boy seemed to sense her grief. With a half smile on his face, he opened his arms to her.

“Come to me.”

“Lanak!” Tinasha cried, leaping into his arms, and he stroked her hair gently.

Tinasha closed her eyes, wanting to cry at how warm his hand felt.

Now was the one time she could forget all her worries and her loneliness. Once she became his queen, she was sure she’d never suffer such thoughts again.

“Lanak, I’m sorry.”

“It’s all right. Just promise me you won’t do it again.”

“Yeah. I’ll try hard… So please don’t hate me.”

“You needn’t worry,” Lanak assured her. The voice floated out over her head, and she hugged the boy all the tighter, wishing desperately that he’d never abandon her.

She had loved him.

She had trusted him with her heart and soul.

But why?

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Tinasha's quarters in the castle had been completely emptied. The transportation array linked to her tower was gone, too.

Rumors traveled through every corridor on hushed whispers as everyone wondered why the witch had so suddenly disappeared without notice.

While some guesses held kernels of truth, not one of them struck upon the whole story.

It had now been a day since Tinasha's disappearance. Lazar left the study and let out a long sigh. The man waiting for him out in the hall waved to him. Lazar looked up and murmured the man's name. "General Als… Everyone."

Standing before him were Als, his officer Meredina, as well as the court mages Sylvia, Kav, and Doan. The entire group took a few paces down the corridor before Als dared to ask, "How's His Highness doing?"

"Not good. At first glance, he looks the same as he ever does, but…," Lazar answered.

"And yet he's still able to do his job. That's just like him," remarked Als.

"He won't tell me what happened," Lazar admitted.

"I want to know, but I'm afraid I won't like what I hear…," confided Als.

Sylvia joined the conversation, her eyes full of tears. "Where did Miss Tinasha go? …It was right after the ball, wasn't it? Did I do something she didn't like?"

"I don't think that's it. She wasn't that sort."

Their discussion was getting nowhere, and everyone lapsed into silence.

Just then, Oscar emerged from the room. He surveyed the entourage with a frown, but he walked right up to Lazar and handed him some documents.

"I'm done. You handle the rest."

"Th-that was fast…," Lazar said, accepting the stack.

Next to him, Als inquired suspiciously, "Your Highness, where are you going with your sword on?"

"Lucrezia's forest."

"What?!" exclaimed the entire group in chorus.

Recalling what happened before, Lazar rushed to stop him. "Please wait. What if something dangerous happens?"

"It won't, so I'm fine. Let me go."

"Your Highness, I'm going with you. Please wait," Lazar insisted

"I—I am, too," Sylvia added.

As the scene devolved into chaos and everyone spoke over one another, there came a peal of laughter from above their heads. Oscar looked up to see a woman with chestnut-brown hair floating in midair.

"You don't have to go anywhere. I'm right here," the Witch of the Forbidden Forest said with a wink.

"So she really did leave after all." Lucrezia sighed as she looked out at the group now seated by the windows inside the study. She looked unusually low-spirited.

“What do you mean ‘after all’?” Oscar asked, sitting behind his desk again. He picked up on something unsavory in what she revealed.

“I mean, I was invited to Cuscull, too,” Lucrezia said.

Kav had just taken a sip of tea, and he broke into a coughing fit when he heard that.

“What did you decide?” Doan inquired timidly.

“I said no, of course. I’m sure the other witches did, too. Witches have no interest in countries and politics. Oh, well, one of us does but rejected the offer, too. The fact that our little Tinasha has gone means there’ll be troubles among the other countries.”

Everyone except Oscar gulped, their expressions heavy.

It was true that until now, a witch had never backed a country and assisted its invasions into other nations. When Tinasha had fought on the front lines seventy years ago, that had been in opposition to an invasion, and the use of her force had been limited to fighting the demonic beast.

Every nation maintained that the witches were beings who were not to be trifled with largely because of how powerful they were. It was also due to the fact that witches didn’t intervene in international skirmishes among mortals.

That the most powerful witch had seemingly allied herself with a nation set on invading other countries was concerning to say the least. The panic this development would cause would no doubt result in serious trouble.

A dark expression on his face, Oscar swung his legs up on top of his desk and crossed them. He looked up to the witch sitting behind him. “Do you know what kind of a relationship Tinasha and that Lanak guy have?”

All the courtiers tensed upon hearing the name Lanak for the first time. They realized he must have something to do with Tinasha’s disappearance but judged it wise to say nothing, considering Oscar’s mood.

Lucrezia, on the other hand, broke into a grin. “I do. She’s been looking for him ever since she became a witch. Now that they’ve finally been reunited, isn’t that a good thing?”

“Something’s off about that guy.”

“Are you jealous?” teased Lucrezia.

“I am, but there’s still something off there, though I can’t rightly tell what.”

The man who’d taken Tinasha away appeared to have one foot in a dream. It was obvious he was a powerful mage based on how he’d transported himself and Tinasha away with no incantation, but he left a general impression of being dangerous and not entirely sane.

Lucrezia floated into the air, then flipped upside down and got a closer look at Oscar’s expression. “Does it really matter? Tinasha was okay with it, after all. How about you just let her go? No one likes a persistent man.”

“I can’t,” Oscar stated bluntly.

“Oh, how stubborn. She made her choice all on her own. Who are you to go sticking your nose in? Shouldn’t you worry about yourself more?” Lucrezia inquired, gazing at Oscar with a bit of a mocking smile.

It was the gaze of a witch who ensnared, compelled, and controlled people’s hearts. Oscar looked back into those eyes without faltering—and made a decision. “I will not give up on her no matter what anyone says. In my eyes, she’s my one and only. If I kill that man and bring her back and she still says she’d rather have someone else, then I’ll let her go.”

Oscar was positive that he knew Tinasha better than she thought he did.

What she liked, what she hated. What she loved, what made her upset. He knew her loneliness, as well as her stubborn refusal to rely on others.

It was that understanding that drove Oscar to reach out after Tinasha. There was already a boundless distance between the two of them. If he stopped here, he’d never reach her.

Oscar’s fierce determination burned in his eyes, and Lucrezia met his gaze evenly. Time stretched out between them, feeling both endless and momentary.

Someone sighed. Lucrezia wiped the scorn off her face and sat down on the study’s desk. “First, I want you all to promise me that you won’t tell her you heard anything from me. I don’t want her to kill me. I will reveal everything I know about Tinasha to you. She only ever recounted indifferent recollections of her past to me, so think for yourselves about how she may have felt back then.” Breaking off there, the witch gazed out at the entire group. “And finally…I will only tell these things to those who are prepared to fight to the death with Tinasha. If you aren’t ready, then you shouldn’t hear this.”

Oscar closed his eyes and didn’t move.

Als looked at his friend Meredina. After some hesitation, she stood up. Lazar and Kav stood up, too. They had gone back and forth in their minds, but in the end, they bowed to those who remained and left the room.

Doan and Sylvia stayed. Doan met Lucrezia’s gaze with conviction, while Sylvia clenched her hands into tight fists. Als smiled wryly at that.

His eyes still closed, Oscar spoke. “Good. Go ahead and begin.”

With a sweet smile, Lucrezia launched into a long tale that took place many years ago.

“Before I begin my story, let me tell you her true name.”

“True name? It’s more than just Tinasha?” Oscar asked.

“Yes. Her full name is Tinasha As Meyer Ur Aeterna Tuldarr. Aeti is a nickname for Aeterna.”

“Tuldarr?!” exclaimed Doan and Sylvia, thoroughly startled.

Timidly, Sylvia asked for clarification. “Tuldarr as in the Magic Empire that vanished overnight four hundred years ago, correct? I never expected her to carry the name of that ancient place…”

“So she’s royalty,” Oscar concluded. He was a little surprised, but it made sense. Tinasha had occasionally shown signs of such a heritage. This explained where it all stemmed from.

Lucrezia listened to everyone’s surprised remarks and laughed. “She is royalty, indeed, but perhaps not in the way you’re imagining. Strictly speaking, she was a potential queen. Tuldarr was a monarchy, but the throne wasn’t inherited based on lineage. Instead, rulers were decided purely by power.”

“If it was decided by power, then what happened if someone dangerous was also incredibly strong?”

“That was why candidates were educated in the castle from a young age. Soon after Tinasha was born, she was taken from her parents and raised in the castle. That was how preeminent her power was.”

Als let out a deep sigh. Lucrezia smiled in a motherly way. “So both a boy and girl would be chosen as potential regents, and they would become engaged. In Tinasha’s case, the boy was the king’s only son—Lanak. In terms of status, he was about equal to her, but in terms of power, he was no match for her. Everyone thought she would be queen and he would be her consort.”

“What a world,” Oscar commented.

“That’s what royal families are like. You have Akashia, don’t you?” Lucrezia said, looking at Oscar. The prince shrugged. It was true that without the royal sword, Oscar might not have been able to brave all the dangers that led him to Tinasha in the first place.

“Even so, Lanak apparently doted on this girl five years younger than him. They’d been together ever since Tinasha was a baby and as close as a real brother and sister. But all around them, unrest was brewing.”

Lucrezia narrowed her eyes and pointed to Oscar. “At the time, Farsas and many other countries were growing stronger. Tuldarr had broken off diplomatic relations with all other nations, and internal debate raged over whether that should continue. The Reformists urged Tuldarr to engage with foreigners and exchange technology with them. The Traditionalists insisted that Tuldarr was a special country that was better not intermingling. Neither side would yield. Eventually the king fell ill, and the Reformists championed Tinasha while the Traditionalists sided with Lanak. They argued over which would be heir.”

“You say they argued, but wasn’t it basically already decided that Miss Tinasha would take the throne?” inquired Als.

“Yes, it was. Which is why the Traditionalists hatched a plan. They plotted to kill two birds with one stone by preventing Tinasha’s coronation while also fortifying Lanak’s power.”

Lucrezia took a breath, licked her red lips, and continued.

“At the time, Tinasha was thirteen. One night, she woke up and found herself being spirited away in Lanak’s arms. She wondered why, but Lanak told her, ‘Something good’s about to happen,’ and she trusted him. For

someone like Tinasha, who was separated from her parents and brought up in the castle, Lanak was the one person who understood her circumstances. He carried her into the cathedral and laid her down on the altar…

"And then…very slowly, he cut open Tinasha's belly with a dagger.

"I remember Tinasha told me that it was 'the kind of thing that happens all the time.' She'd been smiling, her dark eyes closed, as if she hadn't even been the one it'd happened to."

"…What did you just say?" Oscar asked, swinging his legs back onto the floor and sitting up.

The others were staring at the Lucrezia, varying degrees of terror on their faces.

The witch giggled, although her eyes were filled with anger. "Oh, did you not catch that? Lanak and the Traditionalist mages used the blood and guts of Tinasha—a powerful mage—to summon magic. They didn't want her to die partway through, so they used a life-prolonging spell but did nothing for the pain. When the magical power appeared, Lanak absorbed it."

"Didn't he think of her as his sister?!" Als shouted, half rising out of his seat.

Lucrezia curled her lip scornfully. "He did. But he had his wounded pride to think about, too. A young girl who relied only on herself had a power that far outstripped his, guaranteeing it was she who would succeed to the throne, not him, despite him being prince."

"Unbelievable…," Sylvia faintly murmured as her eyes welled up with tears. Next to her, Doan was uncharacteristically biting his lower lip in fury.

Oscar recalled Tinasha's strange reaction when he'd picked her up and placed her in bed. That incident far in the past, four hundred years ago, must've left an unforgettable mark on her mind.

With everyone's hate stirred up, the witch went on with her story.

"But the magical power they summoned was much greater than they'd imagined. The plan was to split it up using five names and affix each one to a part of Lanak's body. But ultimately, they failed to control it. One of the mages working the spell ran away; one was eaten by the magic and died. The power whipped up into a huge vortex surrounding Tinasha…and it destroyed Tuldarr. That's why the country fell to ruin overnight."

The two mages paled. They had learned about the ancient Magic Empire and its mysterious downfall. Lucrezia gave a limpid smile and returned to recounting Tinasha's history.

"Tinasha was on the verge of death but still conscious. She saw Lanak and the other mages escaping and grew frantic… This next part I don't personally think had anything to do with her talent or power. Whether it was the willpower or the tenacity of someone half-dead, Tinasha succeeded in bringing the magic under control and absorbing it. However, she couldn't absorb it all, and the parts that she couldn't scattered all over the world, forming the magical lakes."

Lucrezia lifted up her ivory hands. Before their eyes, a map of the continent appeared in midair. Five locations glowed red—the remaining magical lakes.

"Though the storm of magic vanished, the country was already in ruins. All around her were heaps of rubble. She lay there in exquisite pain for three days while her stomach wound healed."

The map disappeared. Lucrezia smiled, biting back her sorrow. "And once it was all over—she became a witch."

That was the tale of how a thirteen-year-old girl met with a checkered fate in a time long past. It was a long-forgotten tragedy that couldn't be altered

"After that, Tinasha built a tower in a corner of the Tuldarr territory and made it her home. Through the years, she continued to search for Lanak. I've never dared to ask her why. That's the end of the story. What do you think?"

Lucrezia looked at Oscar. She appeared to be grinning, but she wasn't.

Slowly, Oscar let out a long exhale.

When he closed his eyes, it felt like visions of a distant past sprang up in his mind's eye.

There was a desolate landscape and a girl. One who'd lost everything and had become a witch.

How much despair had she suffered? Despite it being more than anyone could've rightly endured, Tinasha had still managed to smile so naturally before everyone. How long must it have taken until she could get that smile back?

Oscar thought of his witch.

He recalled her fragile body. Her proud soul. Her whims, her love, her loneliness, her cruelty.

Oscar wished he could have been there to take her hand in the beginning.

He cursed himself for not being at her side when she was suffering the most.

Those were ancient memories, however, which meant the only thing he had any hope of reaching…was Tinasha as she was now.

"Do you think she still loves the man who slit her belly open?" Oscar asked Lucrezia.

"Who knows?"

"Then how do you think she feels about me?"

"Don't ask me things you know the answer to," Lucrezia replied, pointing a red-painted nail at him. "She left the barrier on you, didn't she? And she left you her dragon? There's your answer."

Oscar touched the back of his left ear.

The night before, Tinasha had written a sigil in her own blood to temporarily seal off his protective barrier. If Lanak had seen the barrier, it seemed unlikely he would've let Oscar be.

Tinasha’s silent gift to Oscar was still protecting him, even in her absence.

Oscar stood up and addressed the group. “There are no changes to the essential plan. I’m going to kill that disgusting man and bring Tinasha back. That’s all.”

Als nodded, his eyes closed, and Doan bowed. In tears, Sylvia bobbed her head over and over.

The Witch of the Forbidden Forest looked at them and smiled like a mother of children who had done well.

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A memory of a past that could never be recovered.

“You can sleep,” Lanak told Tinasha, and she closed her eyes. She was in his arms as he walked along, and they were warm.

To Tinasha, he was the only family she’d ever had. That was why she found herself comfortable enough to act so defenseless.

For a while, she lingered in a hazy dream, but she blinked her eyes open once she realized that the air around was suddenly different.

The pair were in a dim, cavernous room. It felt cool, and Lanak’s echoing footsteps were the only sound.

After noticing that Lanak was carrying her up some stone steps, she murmured, “Is this the cathedral?”

“Ah, are you awake? Your magical resistance is strong, so of course you woke up.”

“Magical resistance…”

Lanak was talking as if he’d used magic to put her to sleep.

The alabaster man climbed the stone steps. At the top was a ceremonial altar, with rays of moonlight streaming in from a skylight onto the chilly platform made of pale stone. Tinasha finally noticed the figures all around them. Countless mages in robes, faces shadowed by hoods, were clustered around the altar in silence.

“…Lanak? Who are these people?”

He didn’t answer her.

Smiling limpidly…he placed her down onto the cold altar.

When she tried to get up, he pressed her shoulders back down against the carven slab.

“Stay still, Aeti,” he said and took something from a recess in the dais.

Rays of moonlight caught something white.

Tinasha saw it, but she couldn’t comprehend what it was. She just lay there on her back as if frozen, staring at the dagger Lanak was holding.

“Lanak…?”

The blade plunged down.

The tip pierced her belly.

“…Aaaaaahhhhhh!”

Her body arched up like a bow, but Lanak held her down and brazenly cut her stomach open.

Blood spurted and flew, and her guts were dragged out.

She heard the sound of multiple people chanting. No matter how she shouted and struggled, Lanak kept cutting her open.

Her high-pitched screams didn't stop until they turned at last into bitter sobs.

Thus, in a tale as old as time, that loathsome country came to an end.

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"…!"

Tinasha jerked awake.

She clutched her head with shaking hands. Inside her mind, dreams and reality and the past and the present were all jumbled up.

She looked around and found herself in an unfamiliar room. She sat up in bed, tugging on her long nightgown.

After several deep breaths, her heart finally stopped pounding. Once she got out of bed, she began to pace around. Before long, she caught sight of a full-length mirror on the wall.

For a moment, she saw a skinny little girl there and she gasped.

"Ah…"

Breathless, she looked again but now saw only her adult self reflected back at her.

Tinasha looked nothing like the child she'd once been. The years had worn her down and caked her with despair and hatred. She knew that deep in her heart, however, that same self was still there. That girl who'd been driven mad four hundred years ago was still there.

Tinasha stepped up to the mirror and placed a hand on the icy glass. "This is why I told you not to get too close to a witch, Oscar…"

Her lips curled into a self-deprecating smirk, as the dark eyes of the woman inside the mirror seemed to avert her gaze.

Tearing her eyes away from that reflection, Tinasha went through the basic steps of getting herself ready. She had many things to do now. She couldn't stay in a dream forever.

When she arrived at the castle's main hall, three mages were having an audience with the king. Seated atop a white throne, Lanak noticed her and called, "Good morning, Aeti. Did you sleep well?"

"I did, thank you. Who are these people?"

"Ah yes. Apparently, they're about to head out to a city in Tayiri." Lanak chuckled.

The way he phrased this made it sound like it had nothing to do with him, and Tinasha cocked her head innocently. "To go burn that city?"

Her question sounded like a little girl's, and one of the three mages nodded with emphatic aggression. "Yes. A declaration of war."

"Then I'll do it," Tinasha decided.

“What?! But…”

She’d made the statement rather lightly, twirling her hair, and the three mages exchanged bewildered looks.

The beautiful witch smiled fearlessly. “I’m allowed to ask for whatever I want. I will go to the city. You three go prepare for war or something.”

Tinasha fixed the mages with powerful eyes the color of darkness and the bearing of royalty. More than anything, however, the witch possessed a power that afforded no room for disagreement.

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One week after Tinasha disappeared, Oscar was buried in diplomatic materials in Farsas Castle, very far from Cuscull.

Cuscull, the northwestern part of Tayiri that had broken off and declared independence, shared no borders with Farsas.

Reaching it would require first going through Old Druza in the northwest or Cezar in the northeast, then Tayiri itself.

“Or first go west, then north through the territory of Old Tuldarr, and surround Cuscull from the west,” Oscar observed.

“But supposedly the magical power fields are unpredictable in Old Tuldarr,” Lazar said.

“Some people say that land was cursed to begin with, but no matter how you look at it, the real source of the problems has got to be *him*,” Oscar spat. “Because the land is permeated with a large-scale forbidden curse… I never would’ve thought the magical lakes stemmed from the same source.”

Oscar stared at the unfurled map of the mainland on his desk.

Beyond the western borders of Farsas lay deserted, desolate land belonging to no country—the wasteland where Tinasha’s tower resided. The presence of the witch’s spire was certainly a part of why the area had been abandoned for over three hundred years, but there was more to it than that.

That barren strip of land ran along the western edge of the tower all the way up to western Tayiri. It had been regarded as cursed since the Dark Age because of the fall of Tuldarr.

“I never considered it much before, but was all that land under Tuldarr’s rule? It would had to have been almost as big as Farsas is now. That was unusual for the Dark Age, wasn’t it? Tuldarr must’ve been mighty indeed,” Oscar observed.

“It certainly seems to have possessed the power befitting the title of ‘Magic Empire.’ According to Miss Lucrezia, Tuldarr was originally founded as a place to shelter persecuted mages,” Lazar explained.

“So it grew more and more powerful from there, until it rose to become the most powerful country on the continent by way of magic alone. Then one day it was brought to absolute ruin leaving only forbidden, magic-soaked waste behind. I’ve never heard something so ridiculous.”

When Tinasha had told Oscar of how their current era came to be known as the Age of Witches, she’d said the spell that was supposed to use the

Witch Who Cannot Be Summoned as the catalyst would have irreversibly altered the mainland. Apparently, Tinasha herself had been used in the very same way, and the effects of that incident could still be felt to this day.

The mere thought of that served only to infuriate Oscar. He knew if he dwelled on that idea too long, he'd want to march into Cuscull alone and cut that man named Lanak down where he stood. The others definitely wouldn't allow him to do that, however. Even Oscar had to admit it was far too brash.

That said, spurring the military into action because of his own personal feelings was even more out of the question.

"I guess all I can do is wait until Tayiri comes running to us in tears…"

"What if Miss Tinasha gets married in the meantime?"

"…Now there's an interesting thought," said Oscar, indicating that Lazar should lower his head. Then Oscar used his fists to slowly apply pressure to Lazar's temples.

"Ow, ow, ow, ow!"

"According to Lucrezia, Lanak is a spirit sorcerer, too. If he's going to get married, he'll wait until the fighting's done."

"I—I see…," Lazar whimpered.

Oscar let go, releasing Lazar. Instantly, he sprang out of his lord's grasp, rubbing his sore temples with tears in his eyes. "Your Highness, did you do this to Miss Tinasha, too…?"

"I use different amounts of force on different people, obviously," Oscar replied. Lazar was looking at him reproachfully, suspecting him of treating his protector rudely. If Oscar had put real force into the move with Tinasha, he'd have crushed her delicate skull.

Oscar folded up the map and snapped, "I don't know who he thinks he is, sweeping in and shamelessly spiriting Tinasha away, but I won't be satisfied until I cut him into forty-eight different pieces."

"I don't think it has to be that many pieces," Lazar protested.

"Anyway, I guess I'll make sure we're ready to ship out at any time while we wait to see what Tayiri's move is," Oscar said, scratching his temple with the end of a pen.

As it happened, he didn't have to wait very long. That evening, two letters addressed to Farsas arrived.

In a castle hall, the king looked out at the cluster of royal council members and showed them the letters in his hands. "Here they are. One is from Tayiri, asking for aid from neighboring countries against Cuscull's violent attacks. It says that Cuscull appears to be plotting to conquer the entire mainland and that it will not be satisfied with Tayiri alone," the king detailed in a leisurely tone.

One general, Granfort, raised his hand and stepped forward. This man was in the prime of life, and he spoke in a measured, dignified voice. "My apologies, but it is hard for me to believe that Cuscull truly does have that intention based solely on the word of their current target. Isn't this simply

some internal skirmish? I must express doubts as to the wisdom of sending our troops into the situation so recklessly."

"Ah, you would think so normally. But there's one more letter…from Cuscull. This has gone out to all the Four Great Nations—Tayiri, Cezar, Gandona, and Farsas. It's a request for surrender."

The king's words sent a shock wave of fright through those assembled.

Just as quickly as the fear had come, the royal council started to murmur among itself, with some snickers mixed in. The Four Great Nations were all powers with extensive, storied histories and unquestionable sovereignty. For a tiny country founded less than a year ago to demand submission of these superpowers was ludicrous beyond belief. Surely, Cuscull was getting too far ahead of itself.

Oscar and Als were the only ones not laughing.

What would the reaction have been like if it weren't Cuscull trying to annex the Four Great Nations but the former monarchy called the Magic Empire? In the war-torn Dark Age, Tuldarr was a powerful state that successfully repelled invasions from other countries without surrendering ground. What would happen if that country that had once existed to protect the rights of mages now sought to attack other countries as a means of ensuring that goal?

More and more mages were flocking to Cuscull by the day, including incredibly powerful spirit sorcerers. Fighting against them would necessitate anti-magic warfare. There hadn't been a mage-centric war on the mainland in the past two hundred years, however. Chances were high that one wrong move could lead to getting mowed down without even knowing what was happening.

The king, famous for his mild nature, surveyed those present with a stern look. "We don't yet know if this will end up as something we can laugh about. I would prefer not to misread a nation and do something that cannot be undone. Five major Tayiri cities were destroyed all at once the other day. Casualties are estimated to be in the thousands. These were not cities that happened to be close to Cuscull, either. The attacker appears to have simply chosen the largest settlements. One of them was not far from Cezar at all."

A hush fell over the audience.

Ultimately, the study of magic was rather lacking in most countries. Many were content to simply learn what had already been recorded in books. At best, a kingdom kept around fifty court mages. Cuscull had many, many more. It was beyond most people to accurately predict when and where such a sizable force of mages would attack. A city in Farsas could be struck the next day.

After making sure that the hall was quiet again, the king opened the letter in his hand. His gaze dropped to it. "Finally, this is for Oscar."

"What is it?"

“In the cities in Tayiri that were destroyed…the people vanished, but the buildings were left intact. They say it’s the work of the Witch of the Azure Moon.”

Everyone in attendance suddenly stiffened.

A witch, who’d previously been content not to involve herself, had finally started using her immense power to interfere in war. Those who understood how unprecedented this was shuddered with fear, confusion, and horror. Some of them looked reproachfully at Oscar, knowing the witch in question had been at his side until very recently.

Oscar himself was like a rock, and his expression didn’t change.

With his eyes trained on his son, the king continued. “Tayiri requests that you, as the current bearer of Akashia, slay the witch. This is separate from the request for aid made of Farsas; they want you to kill her. Can you do it?”

“I can,” Oscar answered immediately. Behind him, the color drained from Als’s face. He raised his hand, intending to say something.

Before the general could speak, however, Oscar added, “I refuse to do so, however.”

The king looked puzzled, and a faint line creased his brow. “I won’t ask you to endanger yourself by going if you can’t win.”

“I’m the only one who *can* kill her. But I won’t. If Tayiri wants aid, let’s go give it to them. But only if Cuscull is our enemy. Tinasha’s a separate matter.”

“Didn’t she join up with Cuscull of her own free will?” inquired the king.

“It might look that way, but I don’t think so,” Oscar replied.

The king’s face darkened in an exceedingly rare display of anger. His full intimidating aura, normally held in check, was laid bare. As the royal council members grew pallid, the king rose from his chair and looked down at Oscar. He took in a short breath and then proceeded to berate his son. “Are you a fool to get so possessed by a witch?! Have you forgotten that the lives of the people are riding on *your* shoulders?!”

Everyone shrunk inward at their lord’s earsplitting roar of indignation.

Oscar only offered a wry huff, however.

The witch had said the same thing to him. It wasn’t very long ago, but Oscar felt oddly nostalgic about it already. Everyone was chewing his ear off, trying to test him.

Oscar met his father’s angry gaze, his bright sky-blue eyes blazing. “Father, we don’t need to go back and forth. I’ve already made up my mind. I don’t plan to lose, and I also don’t plan on giving anything up.”

That much Oscar had decided a while ago. Perhaps everything had been leading up to this ever since Oscar had learned the truth of Tinasha’s past from Lucrezia… Or maybe it’d been from when Oscar had first reached the top of Tinasha’s tower.

Regardless, the prince’s answer was clear, calm, and wholehearted. The king eyed him silently.

After only a moment, the king's rage seemed to quiet and he gave a heavy shrug of resignation. "It really must run in the family…"

No one in the room understood the meaning behind their ruler's mutterings. With a pained smile, the king sat himself back down.

"All right, then. Do as you like. In exchange…"

"In exchange?" Oscar urged.

"You take the throne. I think I'll abdicate."

"Y-Your Majesty!" cried Minister of the Interior Nessan in a panic.

The king received the concern rather nonchalantly. "It's a little early, but I don't mind. He's already handling almost all the official duties. The one who rules this country is supposed to also be the bearer of Akashia anyway. It's the perfect opportunity for Oscar to do some important things."

Even Oscar was taken aback by his father's rather sudden decree. It was true that kings in Farsas took the throne unusually quickly compared with other countries, though. This was because the king of Farsas wielded Akashia, meaning he had to be a capable swordsman.

In accordance with that tradition, it would not have been strange if Oscar had been crowned as soon as he'd come to possess the mighty weapon. His father had just been occupying the throne since that day.

Oscar snapped out of his shock, and a smile broke across his graceful features. "I can't believe you… All right, I accept the throne with the utmost gratitude."

The king nodded, a dark smile on his lips. It very much resembled his son's. He seized upon the opportunity to give Oscar another warning. "You must always be aware that your decisions affect the entire country."

"I will take that to heart," Oscar declared, silently wondering what Tinasha would think of him saying such a thing.

He tried to imagine it, but the Tinasha in his mind had her back turned to him.

"I'm a witch, and you possess Akashia; you really might have to kill me someday."

At the time, the witch had said that in partial jest, but it was the truth.

Oscar was the owner of the only sword in the world capable of killing the Witch of the Azure Moon—his protector. Maybe Tinasha had so enjoyed her time together with Oscar because she'd known all along that it was ephemeral.

What role did she expect Oscar to play in the war that was to come? Did she instead wish him not to get involved at all?

Oscar could only grasp at an answer as the tale hastened onward, faster and faster.

4. The Shape of Emotion

If he closed his eyes, he could still see it so clearly—the sight of his mother in agony, engulfed in flames.

Nearly ten thousand soldiers marched through the Asdra Plains, a landscape with nothing to entice the eye but the thick forests that flanked it. The plains were not far from Cuscull at all, cut through by a highway road that led from Tayiri to Cuscull. Troops marshaled by Tayiri's Prince Reust marched along this road on their way to Cuscull. This crown prince was Cecelia's older brother, much sterner than their father in temperament, and he had disapproved of his royal father's decision to send aid requests to the neighboring countries.

The Tayiri people were known for their valor in battle, and they regularly boasted that their soldiers could beat Farsas's in hand-to-hand combat. In the eyes of the military officers of Tayiri, Reust included, Cuscull was a country of five hundred mere mages at best—no different than an irritating pest. It didn't matter to them that such a number of magic users was ten times more than a normal country possessed.

The troops Reust commissioned, commanded by a trusted general in his place as he remained in the castle, made their way with no troubles. At their current pace, they would reach the castle in Cuscull in another two days.

"…They'll reach the target in twenty minutes."

The scout's report made all in the forest tense up.

Cuscull mages were lying in wait. For the past several days, they had made meticulous preparations to ambush the Tayiri army. Riding high on prebattle excitement, one mage said, "Can't wait to see the looks on their faces."

"It'll be over before that happens. They don't have any mages on their side. They can't use or defend against magic."

Their hushed whispers were as much to reassure one another as anything else.

Another mage piped up loudly, "They're just a pack of delusional fools who think they're strong, even though they don't even have any magic. They better realize who's going to be controlling whom."

Upon hearing such scornful derision, the Cuscull soldiers all around them exchanged uncomfortable looks. Not able to use magic themselves, the soldiers ended up on the receiving end of numerous openly contemptuous glances. Leaning against a tree trunk, Renart rolled his eyes.

The oppressed had flocked together to form a country, and now they looked down on anyone who wasn't one of them. That was the current state of affairs. The few soldiers that Cuscull commanded had been brought to the fledgling nation for a number of reasons. Some were the family members of mages who had come; some agreed with Cuscull's founding principles; some were simply in it for the promise of new money.

Whatever the purpose, they faced worse treatment than the mages because they could not cast spells. Peeling the veneer off the so-called nation of mages revealed this underneath. It was still a long way away from any sort of stability derived from a ruler with overwhelming power. It was not yet Tuldarr.

Originally from Tayiri, Renart was a youthful mage fighting for Cuscull. He loathed seeing how those around him were behaving and shut his eyes. The murmurs persisted, even in the dark.

"Anyway, the witch is getting her revenge now, isn't she?"

The atmosphere of the forest grew even more fraught at that.

They were talking about the woman who had suddenly been made the king's bride.

She was terribly beautiful, with black eyes and hair, and she destroyed five enemy cities as soon as she arrived in Cuscull. There was no warning and no mercy given to women and children. Her power was so tremendous that it inspired more fear and awe than joy in victory among the mages of Cuscull. Because they were mages themselves, they understood her power far outstripped that of any human.

"…So she really is a witch?"

"Most likely. I don't know which one she is, but I pray she's not the Witch Who Cannot Be Summoned. That's the one who destroys countries."

"Best not to interact with her. She's only our ally for as long as we don't upset her."

A while back, a member of the royal council by the name of Kagar came to invite her to Cuscull, but he incurred her wrath and got himself cut down in cold blood. The king had now set her free to do as she liked. No one wanted to be her next victim.

"A witch? Now isn't that interesting," cut in a very relaxed voice.

Renart opened his eyes. There was now a man standing in the middle of the group—the chief mage of Cuscull, Bardalos. He wasn't very tall, and his looks were nothing to write home about. His eyes glinted with a sadistic gleam, however, constantly seeking out his next prey.

"The witches can change the course of history, or so they say. Don't you think it's actually pretty good luck that we've got one at our disposal?" Bardalos asked leadingly, but all fell silent. Not only were they afraid of the

witch—they were also afraid of Bardalos. Originally hailing from a small eastern country, he was a criminal who had carried out numerous mass murders in the towns and villages of his homeland. After wiping out the team sent to take him down, he was banished and went into hiding. Now he had reappeared as the chief mage of Cuscull.

Seeing that no one would answer him, Bardalos snorted and pointed out at the plains just beyond the edges of the forest they were concealed in. “Well, it’s just about that time. They’re walking right into our slaughterhouse. Let’s burn them to the ground.”

At that, everyone squinted out at the rolling fields. As Renart gazed at the shadowy shapes of troops marching closer, he thought of the flames on a day long ago.

Ever since Renart could remember, he and his mother had lived in a cabin in the forest.

His dad died before he was born. His mother was an embroidery artisan who went into town once a week to sell her work and buy food with that money. Renart himself, however, was not allowed to go into town.

Unfortunately, the forbidden was all the more alluring. One day, he slipped out of the house and snuck into town, where he met a group of children his age and showed them what he always did. He used magic to retrieve a girl’s hat that had fallen into a pond. She was in tears, so he thought she’d be happy. When he presented her with the hat, however, she slapped it away with a look of abject fear. The children scattered and fled, and scary-looking guards chased after him.

Renart desperately ran all the way home.

Even now, he could clearly remember the look of despair on his mother’s face when she heard his hurried explanation. When they ran out of the house without even packing their belongings, the guards from town had just arrived. They saw Renart and his mother trying to escape and lit a bottle they’d brought with them. Then they threw the flaming container of oil toward the house, at the two of them. Renart’s mother shoved him away just in time, and he fled into the forest.

He looked back once, only to see his mother in her death throes, writhing in agony in the flames.

“…My mother wasn’t a mage,” Renart muttered to himself.

His mother had died for his mistakes, but mage haters had been the ones who’d actually killed her.

Renart didn’t think of joining up with Cuscull as fleeing to safety. It was a means to carry out something he knew he had to do.

Even now, he could recall the faces of the men who killed his mother. They were still young at the time of the fire, and over the years they went from guardsmen to officers in the army. He knew exactly where they were stationed.

Revenge.

Redemption.

Those were Renart's only reasons to live.

Thus, when he saw the large-scale spell enacted across the plains… Renart felt a dark exhilaration. Those men would die on these grasslands. *They deserve to go up in flames, roiled with agony, just like my mother did that day*, he thought.

"We really stepped in it this time. We're marching out to the middle of nowhere." The general laughed dryly, surveying the army from horseback in the middle of the Asdra Plains. "We've gotta get this over with quickly so we can go home and give a good report to His Highness. We'll make a nice clean sweep of those filthy mages. Ah, maybe we'll bring a few of the nasty curs back as tribute. Chop them up alive."

Flattering laughter rang out around him. The general was in good spirits and sported a grin on his face. Suddenly, a messenger dashed over from the vanguard at top speed. The general's expression quickly soured.

"G-General, we have a problem!" cried the messenger.

"Yes, what is it?"

"There's an invisible wall up ahead… It's blocking our advance!"

Just as the general was about to spout *That's absurd!* the ground beneath them shimmered. From horseback, the general watched as a red spell configuration materialized and expanded across the ground as far as the eye could see.

"What is this…?"

The general leaned forward to get a better look. No sooner had he done so, however, then crimson flames leaped up from the design and swallowed him whole.

"Now there's a sight," said Bardalos, hungrily observing the blazing plains from midair. He could see the figures of thousands of soldiers writhing and collapsing amid the flames below his feet.

The mages had laid out a far-reaching fire ignition spell on the plains in advance. They waited for the Tayiri troops to pass over it, and then they activated it.

It was all done under Bardalos's command, and he watched the sea of flames with delight. As he was taking in the sight of the enemy soldiers' anguish, a voice from the ground hailed him.

He looked down at his subordinate. "Yes?" he asked.

"Lord Bardalos! They're breaking in from the south!"

"Oh, are they? Well, I'll be. Let's go meet them, then," Bardalos declared, an intrigued smirk on his face as he mounted his horse.

Cuscull and Tayiri were now in open war.

The Tayiri cavalry emerged from the flames amid cries of anguish and death throes and the awful stench of burning flesh. Their faces were masks of mad rage as they charged at the mages, who poured from the forest to meet them. Waves of magic hit the Tayiri soldiers one after another, setting them ablaze.

Undaunted, the soldiers kept coming in a rushing torrent that soon reached those Cuscull mages on the front lines. They trampled over the magic users who had fallen to a stab of their spears, and the cavalry soldiers brandished their swords.

“Kill them! Kill them!”

None could tell from which side the cry had come. All anyone could do was muster their sword or spell. Renart fell back to a part of the forest the soldiers hadn’t penetrated and set up a defensive barrier. Shielded from the growing flames, he looked for the former guards who had wronged him years ago.

Inside, he hoped they’d already fallen prey to the licking tongues of fire.

If they hadn’t, Renart was ready to slay them himself. He began a new incantation.

Just then, an explosion went off right next to him.

A scorching hot wave blew through his magical defense wall. Renart whirled back, and his jaw dropped open.

The forest just behind him was gone.

This was Bardalos’s doing. From atop his horse, the chief mage laughed as he let loose more magic attacks.

“Go on and kill them already. If you don’t hurry, they’ll all be gone!” he shouted. This was the voice of a man who was clearly enjoying himself. He sent out another fire explosion. Those mages running about trying to escape found themselves reassured by Bardalos’s power and confidence. With a renewed will to fight, they began pushing back against the Tayiri soldiers.

After the front line moved past, the air filled with silence and a cloying heat.

All that was left were dead bodies burned to a crisp by Bardalos’s magic. Renart saw that among the dead lying there was a soldier who was once his ally. Secretly, Renart let out a sigh of grief.

Less than an hour later, a great number of people lay dead.

As the fires began to wane, the scene they revealed was so horrific that most of the mages turned green at the sight.

Charred corpses blanketed the earth as far as the eye could see. The nausea-inducing spectacle and foul smell hanging in the air were so intense that the mages would likely never forget what they’d witnessed. While victory clearly belonged to Cuscull, the aftertaste was brutal. The suffocating nature of war made it difficult for anyone to speak.

Renart felt suffocated, too, as he sprinted through the forest. He clicked his tongue in annoyance as he caught sight of three soldiers running around screaming like chickens with their heads cut off.

He wondered why they were so desperate to survive at the loss of their dignity. Surely, they should’ve perished in the blaze. How selfish of them to want to live after taking his mother’s life. Someone who killed another had to be ready to suffer the same fate themselves, after all.

Like a huntsman stalking his prey, Renart sent out a blade crafted of wind. It pierced the back of the man lagging the farthest behind, and he fell. When Renart stepped over his body to pass through, he looked at his face.

He'd gotten a little older, but it was definitely one of men who'd murdered his mother ten years ago. The man was already dead, with a trail of blood leaking from his mouth. His eyes were bulged in fear over his untimely death.

Renart was a little surprised to realize that this inspired no emotion in him.

He thought he'd feel satisfied, but he didn't. All he felt was dull and numb, as if he was submerged in cold water. It was like realizing that the person he thought he was this entire time had actually been sloughed off along the way. His body kept going out of pure momentum.

The second one was within range, and Renart shot him down with magic, and he crumpled to the ground like paper. He'd likely died instantly, but Renart didn't look at his face… He didn't want to see.

The third one tripped on a tree root and fell to the ground.

Crawling forward, he looked back and begged in vain, "Someone save me…"

Renart muttered to himself, "Mother pleaded for the very same thing…"

No one came to help her, however. They had killed her in cold blood. So why did they want to live now?

Renart hummed an incantation, and a blade of wind appeared. The man saw it and feebly shook his head. "Please… I don't want to die…"

Renart looked down at the man, lifting his summoned sword.

Thoughts of his mother's last moments and of ten years of hatred came rushing back. All of that would finally end here.

As he narrowed one eye, he heard the man sobbing.

His right hand was hot from the magic he'd manifested. The time he'd waited for was finally here. He'd dreamed of this—the end of the vision seared onto his mind. There was no cause for hesitation.

That was why…

And yet—

For some reason, he just couldn't manage to bring his summoned blade down.

Renart stared at the trembling man. And a command fell naturally from his blood-caked lips.

"…Go."

He lowered his hand. The blade made of magic vanished.

"Go! Don't let me see you again! Get out of here!"

At that, the man rushed to get to his feet and took off deep into the forest. Renart buried his face in both hands so he wouldn't see this. He took a deep breath to calm his agitated breathing.

Then he heard a jarringly blasé taunt from behind him. "Oh-ho? What do you think you're doing? Don't tell me you let the enemy escape?"

The tone was mocking. Renart turned to see Chief Mage Bardalos, with a cynical smirk twisting his face. He eyed Renart. “I thought I said not to let a single one get away. Am I wrong?”

“…You’re not wrong.”

“Well, whatever. I’ll chase him down and kill him. You head back.”

“Wai—” Renart started to cry out, then bit his tongue.

Bardalos snickered as he tore into him. “What is it? Are you telling me not to end his pathetic life? He’s a soldier who entered a battlefield. Don’t you think he knows death is a possibility?”

“He no longer has the will to fight,” Renart argued.

“Do I look like I care? If he doesn’t want to fight, he shouldn’t have come out here in the first place. Or…what? Do you want to die in his place?”

“…Excuse me?” Renart said, utterly at a loss for words as he stared at the man before him. Bardalos’s eyes were filled with a mad, murderous glee. To him, it was all the same if he killed the enemy soldier or if he killed Renart.

Great mages had the power to kill people as easily as cutting blades of grass. That was what it meant to be a mage.

Renart let out a ragged breath. An unspeakable exhaustion weighed heavy on him.

Maybe I wouldn’t mind dying, he thought. He’d die covering for an enemy he thought he wanted to kill. He wanted to burst out laughing.

But—enough. He needed to end things here.

Just when Renart made up his mind, a woman’s thin voice cut in.

“That man is my attendant. I’ll thank you not to bully him too much.”

The voice was unfamiliar, and Renart looked over his shoulder.

There in the forest permeated with the scent of blood stood a raven-haired woman, the king’s favorite.

She was so beautiful it almost looked artificial. Bardalos gave her a dark smile. “Well, well, well, Lady Aeterna. When did you arrive?”

“Only moments ago.”

“Well then, I do apologize for not meeting you personally. You appear quite exhausted. Was it that tiring giving the declarations of war to the other countries? I would’ve happily done that for you.” Bardalos’s tone was openly mocking.

Renart took a closer look at the woman. She did look terribly pale-faced. He could even detect fluctuations in her power, as if she’d spent too much magic.

She only eyed Bardalos with a haughty stare, despite his sarcastic attitude. “This way was faster. Ignore deserters. Treat the wounded and go back to Cuscull.”

“…Very well,” Bardalos said, wiping his expression blank and bowing before teleporting away.

The woman glanced at Renart. Before he could even gasp at the darkness of her eyes, she’d already vanished, too.

“…Thank you for what you did back there,” Renart said, his head bowed. He had come to the woman’s chambers after returning to the palace of Cuscull.

She was sprawled along a couch by the window, looking indolently up at the sky. It was as if she hadn’t noticed him there at all.

Despite her seemingly paying Renart no mind, he inquired, “Why did you save me?”

While he was her attendant, he had never spoken to her. He only knew what she was.

She was the fearsome woman the king had brought back. She was the one who would be queen someday. This was a woman who did not get close to anyone and never smiled. People spoke of her as a doll made of ice whose only job was to kill.

Renart did not believe all the rumors, though he did think of her as one far removed and above himself. Bardalos probably saw through all the rumors, too.

She finally flicked her eyes over to Renart expressionlessly. Her voice was devoid of any inflection as she answered quietly, “Because you looked tired.”

The reply was so simple that Renart wasn’t sure if it was a proper reason.

Curiously, he felt himself freeze up. He was struck by the odd sensation that this woman had peered so thoroughly into him that he may as well have been transparent.

Her long eyelashes were cast down. Her eyes appeared as ebony pools.

It was a strange gaze, very reminiscent of an abyss. Meeting it gave Renart the feeling that he could see his own past reflected there.

“I—I—”

Before Renart registered what he was doing, he spilled everything about himself. It was like a dam had broken. His childhood, his mother’s death, the days he’d spent in pursuit of revenge, and what’d happened earlier that day.

The woman remained silent the entire time, evidently content to stare up at the ceiling. He couldn’t tell if she was listening, but once his story came to an end, she cocked her head at him. “How did you feel when you killed them?”

For a second, Renart was at a loss for words. Hurrying so as not to make that apparent, he fumbled to express himself. “It was like a load was taken off me…but it was also very unpleasant.”

“I see. What about when you didn’t kill one of them?”

Dark eyes pierced right through him. The woman’s question made him shiver with fear, and he answered in a trembling voice. “I felt relief…but I also felt that I should’ve killed him.”

“So honest,” the woman fired back rudely, and Renart was shocked by her tone. This didn’t sound like an emotionless ice doll; Renart was dumbfounded.

Paying her inferior no mind, the woman continued her aggressive line of questioning. “So what will you do now? I can help you escape, if that’s what you want.”

“…What?” Renart stammered, feeling like he’d misunderstood something.

She stared back at him, as even as a cat. “You did what you came here to do. There’s no need for you to stick around here, is there?”

What did it mean for the king’s favorite to be suggesting that a member of his forces flee?

It didn’t look like she was joking or teasing, however. Instinctively, Renart swallowed a held breath.

The king’s bride—a woman rumored to be a witch—was supposed to be a cruel, heartless lady.

Renart thought those rumors wrong. Up close, she was vague and elusive. She seemed set apart from humans but also completely human at the same time.

Feeling that her dark eyes were focused on something beyond the room, Renart couldn’t help but ask, “What is your purpose here?”

Witches were always said to not involve themselves in mortal affairs. Why then was this supposed witch taking such an active role in a war?

Her eyes widened. A faint grimace crossed her face.

Suddenly, her expression revealed itself. A very lonely-looking queen admitted in a whisper, “I… I am here because of my own delusions. That’s all.”

The bitter words didn’t match her beautiful figure. Just as Renart was marveling at how her inner demons were the same as his, the door swung open violently.

“Lady Aeterna! How could you invite such a person in!”

A girl burst in with her shoulders hunched up angrily. Another woman was right behind her.

The younger one in the front looked to be about sixteen years of age. Her slightly curly hair was pinned up, and her eyes blazed with conviction.

The older one in the back couldn’t have been more than twenty. She had dark blond hair and a calm disposition. One glance revealed her to be a fairly powerful mage.

The icy woman let out a sigh as she eyed the younger of the two intruders. “It’s my prerogative to speak to whoever I want.”

“Who is this girl, a lady-in-waiting?” asked Renart.

“Who’s a lady-in-waiting?! I’m a mage, too, you know! I’ll definitely get my revenge on the people who chased us out of town!” the girl snapped, red-faced with anger. She certainly sounded serious, but her childish

phrasing sapped the word *revenge* of all its dark dignity. Renart observed all this with a pained smile.

The girl noticed his expression, and her face turned purple. “What’s your problem? Got something to say, servant?!”

“Tris, hush,” admonished the possible witch, and the girl instantly clamped her mouth shut. While Tris looked displeased, the soon-to-be queen continued, “I told you before that I won’t deny you your revenge. Carry it out as you see fit, whether that’s punishing them by the proper channels or exacting it directly. If you choose the latter, however—that act and your own intentions will only lead back to the past. You must think carefully about whether it’s truly worth it to waste who you are now on that. Is it really so important to lower yourself to nothing but a remnant of your past…? If you’re not prepared, all you’ll succeed in doing is losing yourself, even if you do get your revenge.”

What she said hit Renart hard, for it was undoubtedly true for him as well.

Ten years ago, he’d watched his mother burn to death. Every breath he’d taken since had been to remember that moment. He was just the remnants of that child gone mad with rage. Once that child’s fury dissipated, there was nothing left. That was why Renart felt utterly despondent, with no idea where he should go.

Tris scowled, her face still red, but she said nothing further and stormed out of the room. She slammed the door hard behind her, and the blond woman gave a helpless smile. “I’m very sorry.”

“I’m used to it,” answered the future queen, getting to her feet and letting out a little yawn. She looked at Renart and smiled. “So what’s your answer to my question? What will you do?”

Renart gazed back into her dark eyes.

He didn’t know what lurked there. Nothing was reflected in her gaze; it was as lifeless as a mirror.

Although her delusions had left her stranded, here she was, still standing.

His life should have ended with his revenge, but she’d scooped him up. So if he had to seek a path to go down from now on, it could only be—

Renart made up his mind and knelt before the ebony-eyed woman.

“I hereby pledge my loyalty to you.”

Her eyes widened in surprise, but she quickly recovered and smiled.

“Strange man.”

Her smile was terribly kind and human.

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“Ugh! Why is Lady Aeterna so fond of lecturing?” Tris groused indignantly, sipping tea in her antechamber. Across from her, the blond woman smiled uncomfortably.

Her name was Pamyra; she and Tris were under orders to attend to the witch and look after her needs. However, the one who required the most looking after was actually Tris herself. She had an extremely high opinion of herself, and she sat in her chair with pursed lips.

"She's not even that much older than me. I wish she'd stop her meddling," muttered Tris.

What she said was so far off the mark that Pamyra gaped at her. "What? Tris… Do you not know who Lady Aeterna is?"

"She's His Majesty's bride, isn't she? And a really strong spirit sorcerer, too."

"More than a strong spirit sorcerer, she's the Witch of the Azure Moon."

When she heard that, Tris's face was a sight to behold. Her eyes bulged out of their sockets, and her jaw dropped to the ground. She was frozen in place for a while, and then all the blood drained from her face only to come rushing back and turn her bright red. "Is that true?! The Witch of the Azure Moon?! No way, I…I've admired her forever!"

"It's true. I'm surprised you didn't know," Pamyra replied curtly, while Tris's eyes sparkled with interest.

And she's the last queen of the Magic Empire of Tuldarr, Pamyra thought.

Pamyra was born and raised in an isolated village of spirit sorcerers within the territory of Old Tuldarr.

Four hundred years ago, when Tuldarr was destroyed, its realm stretched far and wide. That said, it may as well have been a city-state, as most only dwelled within the palace city. There were those mages who lived quietly in the wilds, however.

Pamyra was a descendant of those people. All her life, she'd heard the same story—the tale of a girl who was to be queen of Tuldarr and became a witch.

Over hundreds of years, various storytellers had embellished the fable and spun it into a secret legend.

In the story, the witch was beautiful, fearsome, strong…and all alone.

As a young girl, Pamyra had worried and fretted that the witch lived a lonely existence up in her tower. As she grew older, she came to understand that the witch chose that for herself.

As she grew, so, too, did her memory of the fairy tale begin to fade. That was when Lanak came to their village.

Tuldarr's prince spoke of restoring the country. While the others disapproved of such a suspicious proposal, Pamyra alone accepted his invitation. She had long desired to live in a place as wondrous as Tuldarr—the powerful, mysterious nation whose city ran on magic, that researched advanced technology, that cut off all relations with other nations.

A land ruled by the most powerful mages of the modern age. It represented the highest achievement magic's power could accomplish in the entire history of their land.

Legend had it that the regent of Tuldarr would take multiple high-ranking demons, known as mystical spirits, as personal familiars during the coronation ceremony. Nowadays, the idea of humans subduing high-ranking demons—called gods by ancient people in rural lands—sounded like a pipe dream.

Pamyra, however, dared to wonder if, perhaps, it was true.

She felt anticipation and hope swell up within her and left her village for the first time in her life.

But when she came to Cuscull and spoke of her origins, all the other mages sneered at her behind her back.

"I heard her parents are spirit sorcerers. Or, well, they used to be."

"Spirit sorcerers, but they decided to have a child…"

"They gave in to the desires of the flesh, huh? Won't she end up just like them?"

For her, the humiliation was unbearable.

She didn't know how other spirit sorcerers had fared over the past four centuries. In her village, everyone saw it as a happy thing when two people in love got married and were blessed with children.

The idea that losing your spiritual magic would make you inferior as a mage angered and frustrated Pamyra. She did her best to tolerate the rumors, however, believing that everyone would stop talking once they saw what she could do.

The harder Pamyra worked, the worse the gossip got, though. Just when it seemed like too much and the longing to return home began to claw at her mind…*she* arrived.

Lanak introduced her as "my bride and a girl who was raised alongside me." That meant she was none other than the witch who was a potential heir to the throne, just like him.

She had hair like black silk, skin like white porcelain, and true to the story, her eyes were the color of darkness. Pamyra had always thought the witch's beauty had been exaggerated over the years, but the woman's visage left her stunned.

Pamyra hastily volunteered to be the witch's attendant and was certain she'd never forget their first encounter.

The witch, standing by the window, had turned to look at her and said in a tone that carried some amount of surprise, "You're a spirit sorcerer?"

"Yes, I am from the village of Dilenne, Princess."

"Don't call me princess…," the witch replied, uncomfortable. There was a pause, but the witch quickly returned to the topic at hand. "I see—so you're from that village… Is everyone doing well?"

"Yes, thanks to you."

When Tuldarr had been destroyed, much of the land surrounding the castle had been contaminated by a forbidden curse. Pamyra's village was unaffected because the one survivor of the disaster had purified the land around the settlement.

The witch smiled faintly, as if she were remembering that, too. “That was a long time ago. If you’re a spirit sorcerer, does that mean there are many still born in your little town?”

“Yes. My parents were spirit sorcerers, too, and I’ve inherited all their techniques,” Pamyra replied instinctually. She quickly froze, however, afraid she might be mocked again.

Surprisingly, the witch gave a gentle smile. “You are very much loved. That’s a wonderful thing.”

Affection and longing bled out of that gaze. She was as beautiful as the legends said but much kinder than the old fairy tales would’ve had Pamyra believe.

In an instant, Pamyra made up her mind. She imagined it must’ve been quite similar to what a newborn chick felt upon seeing its mother for the first time. Pamyra was struck by a deep, abiding certainty that this witch was her master.

The blond woman knelt and bowed her head low. “As a mage, I pledge myself to thee. Order me as thee will.”

She used to worry if the witch was lonely living all alone in the tower.

Pamyra, however, would do her best to prevent the witch from feeling lonely in this castle. She felt certain that was why she’d ended up here.

5. The Side of Me Unknown to You

The boy stood frozen before the gates to his city. He'd returned from running an errand in the next town over. The streets looked no different. They should've been bustling with people, however. The boy couldn't spy a single person out on the thoroughfare. Shops were empty, as was his own home.

Wandering the city in search of someone—anyone—the boy eventually came to the conclusion that the place was completely deserted. He was at a complete loss. The whole thing felt like some bad dream. Maybe he'd just found his way into a different city that looked identical to his?

Everything looked familiar; the graffiti on the walls that had been there for years, the old dolls decorating the storefront windows.

He went back to his house, clinging to the smallest glimmer of hope.

On the kitchen table, his mother had laid out lunch for him.

It smelled like home, and he felt tears well up. The food was still fairly warm.

He ate, tears pouring down his cheeks, and then ran to the next city over on weary legs to let them know what had happened.

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The extremely gruesome battle of Asdra Plains exceeded almost all expectations.

All of the ten thousand soldiers Tayiri had were lost, save for the five hundred or so who deserted. Cuscull ended up losing just under fifty mages. Such a gruesome outcome forced those neutral countries to reevaluate the power of magic, as well as the danger that Cuscull posed.

The battle of Asdra was not the only thing to prompt such reconsiderations, however.

At almost the same time as the battle, one city in each of the Four Great Nations was attacked.

These assaults were similar to the ones the Tayiri cities suffered: The buildings were left intact, while only the people vanished. Only big cities were targeted, and the countries that had considered themselves mere spectators in the conflict now had to seriously consider the letter Cuscull had sent.

Oscar, his coronation now only four days away, received a report on the attacks and grimaced.

Normally, his being made king would be a grand affair with all the important people from each country in attendance. With the looming crisis, however, it was set to be a simple event for domestic guests only. Along with coronation plans and preparations, the royal council was busy attempting to get a handle on the political situation.

"So how bad was it?" Oscar asked.

Suzuto, standing before Oscar, nervously gave his report on the vanished city denizens. "Just like the attacks on Tayiri cities, the buildings suffered no damage. Inside them… Well, it really was as if everyone simply vanished without a trace. Some restaurants even still had steaming hot bowls of soup on the tables."

"A very bizarre phenomenon," commented Oscar.

"While I couldn't find any signs of human life, I sometimes…got the feeling that something was there."

"What kind of feeling?"

"It was like I felt a presence or a sensation. It struck me rather often, but never did I actually see anyone there."

"…I…see…," Oscar said, dubious. This story got stranger and stranger the more he heard. He wanted to go and take a look for himself but knew that'd only upset everyone.

Oscar dismissed Suzuto, then turned to Doan, who had been waiting in a corner of the study. "What do you think?" Oscar asked.

"To be honest, I have no idea how such a thing could be done," Doan replied.

"Could it be her doing?"

"I'd say it has to be. Her not being responsible poses its own problem, because it means there's another mage capable of impossible things."

"I guess that's true. None of the other witches are involved," Oscar reasoned.

After half a year, he thought he'd witnessed and understood how exceptional Tinasha was, but the truth was that her power on the battlefield was beyond anything he could've conceived. If that much was true of Oscar, who'd gotten to know her, one could only guess how ill prepared other countries were. Doubtless they were fearing for their lives.

"Ugh. She just doesn't know her limits, and it's making it hard for us," groused Oscar.

“Actually, you could say that’s just how prepared she’s been for this,” Doan pointed out calmly. He was right. That was why she disappeared from Farsas.

Oscar sighed. Als, who was also in the room, spoke up. “Cezar has decided to dispatch troops, but Gandona is still hesitating.”

“I see,” Oscar said, putting his legs up on his desk and crossing them. He wet his dry lips with his tongue.

…The answer had been there all along.

Tinasha had only been searching for the right time, and now that time had come. Oscar huffed, swinging his feet down and standing up.

“Marshal the troops. We ship out after the coronation.”

Als and Doan bowed respectfully in response.

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Ever since his gorgeous protector disappeared, Oscar had been plagued by a single lingering thought day after day.

How long has Tinasha been contemplating this exact situation we’re in now?

He was sure she’d figured out who the king of Cuscull was long before Farsas did.

That was why she got rid of her cat familiar after its job was done, and it had to have been the reason she’d rushed to break Oscar’s curse.

Oscar believed there was a different reason she’d trained him, however. She probably left him with a choice, so he wouldn’t end up like her—powerless and violated.

Tinasha was an emotional, self-sacrificing, awkward witch. She was stuck in time forever, but she’d finally chosen to take action. She’d jumped headfirst into her own fate.

As for the future Tinasha was envisioning… Oscar knew she wasn’t acting to safeguard her own future.

What choice did that leave him with, though?

Oscar pondered that question as he looked down on the city from a platform along the castle ramparts.

His coronation went off without a hitch, and the people welcomed their young king with wild, enthusiastic cheers when he was presented to the public. It was a scene Oscar himself had envisioned often. He’d known such a day would come ever since he was a boy, and yet he hadn’t imagined it would be nothing more than a simple milestone.

He was probably the only person in history to get cursed by one witch and then earn the protection of another. Both of those things, however, had come about as the result of the royal burden he’d carried as long as he could remember. Much of his own life was out of his hands; the path of a prince was set before he ever saw it.

That said—choosing Tinasha now was the one thing he did of his own free will.

Oscar had never imagined a future such as this when he was a child. That made what happened from this point on all the more important.

The new king waved to the people and returned to the castle. Without a moment's delay, courtiers and staff clustered around him. As he paced, Oscar made his way down the hallway, giving orders to Chief Mage Kumu, Als, and Doan about the following day's march to Tayiri.

"Make sure we can teleport away at any time. Our opponents are all mages, after all. Plan a way for me alone to be able to get out in the worst-case scenario. I may be able to manage something if I do."

"Very well. Your Majesty shipping out as well is really our last resort, but…"

"Tayiri isn't holding back, and neither can we. Farsas must use everything at its disposal to ensure its safety."

Akashia—the Mage Killer. So long as Oscar held that sword, he carried a powerful advantage over mages. Of course, the bearer needed to be a skilled swordsman, too, but Tinasha had ensured that with her thorough technical instruction. Ultimately, Oscar knew he could even slay a witch if he wanted to.

…He could, but whether he would was another story.

As the group made their way down the hallway, solidifying plans, a boy popped out of the door to the lounge. He leaped in front of Oscar, waving his hands wide and shouting. "You're going to kill the witch, right? I wanna go, too!"

The startling outburst left everyone in silence. As a faint frown crossed Oscar's face, Suzuto came running up from the other end of the hallway.

"What are you doing? You're speaking to His Majesty!" Suzuto scolded, pinning the boy's arms behind his back. He bowed to Oscar. "I deeply apologize, Your Majesty. That was very rude."

"Is this your little brother?"

"No, he's a boy from one of the cities that was attacked… He was away when the tragedy occurred. He had nowhere to go, so I brought him back here."

"Ah, I see."

Evidently, while Suzuto had been out on his investigation, he'd found a boy from a city whose inhabitants had all suddenly vanished and had brought him to safety in the castle. His arms still pinned behind his back, the boy piped up, "I heard all about it. The witch killed everyone, right? I wanna go, too! I'm gonna get revenge!"

"No. Children should be in school," the newly coronated King Oscar flatly insisted.

The boy didn't back down, however, and escaped from Suzuto's grip to shout at the king some more. "Then let me borrow your sword! I'll go kill the witch."

"Listen here…," Oscar started. He grabbed the boy's collar and lifted him off the ground so that the two were eye level. The boy kicked his legs,

and Oscar fixed him with an astounded glare. “No normal person is a match for the witch, even if you did have this sword. Got it? If you do, then behave yourself.”

“You’re just saying that ’cause you don’t wanna kill her! Take me with you!”

All those around were frowning at the child’s wild behavior. Kumu glared at the boy. “How dare you speak to His Majesty like that…”

“It’s fine. Besides, he’s saying some funny stuff. I don’t want to kill her, do I? You’re absolutely right,” Oscar admitted.

“But you’re supposed to be the king!” cried the boy.

“Listen up… If a mage or a witch wants to shoot down a city, they’ll just fire a few huge attacks from above without caring about the buildings and be done with it. Think about how complicated it must have been for her to make the people vanish but to leave everything else untouched. If you don’t use your head, you won’t be able to see them again.”

When the king pointed that out, the boy’s eyes grew wide and he fell silent. After thinking for a bit, he spoke up timidly. “My mom’s…alive?”

“Probably. I’m going to get the witch to tell me,” Oscar said, setting the boy back down on the floor.

He was wobbling with the faint hope he’d been given, but he was equally afraid of possible disappointment. Rather accusingly, the boy inquired, “But what about if they really are dead?”

It was obvious he was afraid to even ask, and Oscar’s eyes narrowed. His handsome face went blank.

He surveyed the boy with the eyes of a king seated on his throne—someone who bore a long history and a heavy responsibility.

As the irrepressible majesty of a king pressed down on him, the boy gulped.

Oscar cast his sky-blue eyes down as he spoke.

“If that truly is the case, then I’ll kill her.”

Oscar’s tone sent a chill down Als’s spine.

It wasn’t a lie. He meant every word.

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At midnight as the moon glimmered like a pearl, Pamyra entered her lady’s chambers to find her drawing a long-distance transportation array.

“Lady Aeterna, where are you going?” asked Pamyra.

The woman standing in the middle of the room flinched and turned around. “Oh, Pamyra. Don’t sneak up on me. Also, don’t call me that.”

“My apologies, Lady Tinasha.”

After hearing the revised term of address, Tinasha stuck out her tongue like a child caught making mischief.

At present, only Pamyra knew of Tinasha’s true nature, which ran completely counter to the personality she assumed when acting as the king’s bride.

Several days after becoming Tinasha's attendant, Pamyra noticed that the witch seemed to be hiding something. Once they were alone, she questioned Tinasha mercilessly while pledging her loyalty. After much pleading and reassurance, she finally seemed to win the witch's trust.

"No matter what happens, I am on your side. If you ever find you cannot trust me, cut me down where I stand."

When Pamyra first pleaded with her, Tinasha glowered at her in silence. She was quickly worn down by her attendant's persistence, however.

"All right, all right… To begin with, don't call me Aeterna when it's just the two of us."

Tinasha had conceded with a faint, exasperated smile, and her demeanor turned much more calm and polite than it had previously been. Pamyra supposed this was the witch's true self, and she thrilled to see it.

Now was not the time for exultation, however. While Tinasha's power was certainly immense, she only had herself and she was exceedingly isolated in Cuscull. Pamyra wanted someone who the two could trust a little more and had recently been wondering if Renart would be that person.

Ignoring Pamyra's fretting, Tinasha resumed work on her array. "I'm heading out for a bit. If someone comes by, cover for me."

"Wait, ah—" Pamyra tried to ask where she was going, but a moment later the witch vanished from the room without a trace.

"I can't believe this woman!" Pamyra cried, but there was no one to hear this. The moon hung silent and pallid in the sky.

※

From the balcony, the moon looked red.

It looks like it's dyed in blood, mused Reust, the crown prince of Tayiri, quite cynically. His hair was bound up and cast a long shadow down his back.

Nearly ten thousand soldiers had perished on the Asdra Plains, because of his own poor judgment. Something bitter was roiling in Reust's stomach as his eyes remained fixed on the heavens.

Tayiri had a long history of persecuting mages.

Over the past one thousand years, the country had seen more than its share of blood. Not once had Tayiri's belief that Irityrdia was the one true god ever been shaken.

World-Splitting Blade and Sleeping Paleface were among the other names for Irityrdia, who decreed that humans with magic were greedy, impure, improperly sprouted, and shouldn't have been born. It was said that those with magic could not keep hold of their minds or bodies in front of Irityrdia and would go on mad rampages that brought harm to innocents. The ancient people of Tayiri bore witness to this truth, feared their god, and shunned mages. It was a tradition that had survived into the modern day. Many mages had attempted their own uprisings, only to be quelled time and again by the overwhelming royal army.

When Cuscull declared independence, no one thought it would last long. Everyone assumed its existence was because the king of Tayiri was too lax.

Reust had felt the same way, and yet the soldiers he had insisted on sending out were annihilated.

Regretting his underestimation for not having marshaled a larger force, Reust cursed himself for not taking command himself. It was much too late for that now, though. In a week, troops from Farsas, Cezar, and Gandona would arrive at the Tayiri capital. Having criticized his royal father for calling in reinforcements, Reust secretly still hoped to achieve something on Tayiri's strength alone before aid could arrive.

"Tomorrow I'll marshal the troops again and command them myself…"

Reust looked up at the sky, bitter determination in his heart. But as he looked out, the moonlit sky suddenly warped.

"…!"

Reflexively, he drew his sword.

That warping was the sign of a mage appearing after long-distance teleportation. He'd seen it many times by now, and he was always able to cut the mage down the instant they appeared. This time, however, it came from the sky, a place his blade couldn't reach. Reust wished he'd brought his bow, but it hardly mattered now.

As he grit his teeth in frustration, the warped space widened.

In the next moment—a witch appeared.

He recognized her right away as the witch who had attacked Tayiri's cities.

She had been so bold as to show herself before striking and announcing that she was indeed a witch. Her hair and eye color were true to the reports, but her beauty far exceeded what Reust had imagined.

She was like moonlight given form. It defied all the laws of the heavens, and he didn't understand why she was blessed with such features. Her long eyelashes stirred slowly. From beneath them, she flashed a piercing look down below.

"Prince Reust?" she called in a voice as clear as cold water.

The darkness in her eyes was so deep it felt like Reust could fall forever. Something about them drew him in.

She was so vivid and striking that Reust thought he might stop breathing. One glance was all it took to utterly captivate him.

Reust's voice was hoarse, and he couldn't answer right away. After a span of some moments, he finally eked out a reply. "What do you want, witch?"

She gave a little nod, floating in midair. The way she spoke suggested she was choosing her words very carefully. "It's pointless to keep attacking Cuscull. I'd like you to call off your march."

"Utter shameless nonsense. What's your aim here?"

The witch sighed a little at his outright scorn and hostility, then pointed one ivory finger at him. “This will all be over in another two weeks. If possible, I don’t want you deploying your reinforcements until then.”

“…What did you just say? What does that mean?”

The witch didn’t answer. Reust was at a loss as to how to interpret her words.

Was she just wasting his time, or did she have some other intention?

Floating in the air, the witch gazed back at Reust impassively. Her black sheer silk dress fluttered in the breeze; she seemed about to disappear any minute now.

Reust was struck by an odd feeling that the witch wasn’t even really there.

He cleared his dry throat and took a step forward. “If you’re asking for favors, come down from there, pathetic mage.”

“Pathetic mage? Don’t you people understand that attitude landed you in the current situation?” the witch asked rhetorically, one side of her mouth quirking up in a cruel smile.

The sight of it made a jolt of fear and excitement course through Reust. He had the distinct sense that her white, wholly inhuman hand could cast him down into unending darkness.

He wondered what to say in reply. Silence was as good as admitting defeat, so he pasted a sneer on his face. “Mages disrupt our god’s world with their selfish desires. Such power is a sin. Come down. If you do, I’ll listen to you.”

Reust didn’t think she’d obey his order, but to his surprise, the witch zipped down swiftly until she was floating at eye level with him, though still beyond his reach.

Now beholding her at an even height, Reust acknowledged that the witch had a startlingly petite frame for someone so strangely intimidating. A wave of light dizziness crashed over Reust as he felt that she’d fit perfectly in his arms if he were to hold her.

A slightly bitter smile twisted the witch’s features. “You’re much taller than I am. You’re probably also that much more flexible, too. But wouldn’t you find it ridiculous if I envied you and tried to cast you out just because of that? Using a god’s name to hunt down those who are different only shows how weak humans are.”

Shadows cast by the moon threw into relief a terrible sadness on her face.

The witch’s dark eyes appeared to be floating and bobbing along a sea of night. Reust wanted to know if he was reflected inside them.

“…You’re trying to use words to deceive me. The power that creatures like you possess is unnatural.”

Everyone in the world was different; that much was to be expected. Mages differed in a more significant way, however. A witch understood that better than anyone.

Snorting, the witch asked Reust, “Have you ever swung a sword down on a baby’s head?”

“…What?”

“Have you ever burned a mother and her crying baby at the stake?”

“What in the…?”

Reust’s throat grew dry. He had an idea what she was trying to say. As the blood drained from his face, the witch clarified, “Your country permitted all of that to happen. Not as madness but as routine. I’ve seen even more horrifying spectacles. That’s the reality of Tayiri.”

Reust was speechless. The witch’s tone wasn’t harsh or scornful at all, though. She spoke with detached indifference.

“As the crown prince, you surely know your nation’s history and about the governments of other countries. You must realize how unusual Tayiri is. Three hundred years have passed since the Dark Age, and no other country is still as relentlessly elitist as your homeland. You should be able to understand that what you’re doing is the same as cutting off your own foot.”

A certain ratio of children with magic were born to parents without any talent for the arcane. Tayiri ostracized those children, regardless of their circumstances. Those kids had been born in defiance of Irityrdia, after all. It wasn’t worth considering whether it was right or wrong. Put another way, it was something most were content not to think about… Reust did not have that option anymore.

The witch tossed back her long black hair. A white light glowed at her fingertips, then changed into a butterfly that flapped its lovely wings and disappeared into the dark of the gardens.

That done, the witch’s voice took on a remonstrative tone. “No matter what kind of a mage you are, there are still rules you are bound to follow. No matter how you struggle, you can’t bring people and nations back to life. That’s true of anyone—mages are no exception. You might think magic users differ from normal people, but the reality is they’re nearly identical.”

“…A witch’s nonsense.”

“No matter what I am, there still remains a man who can cut me down quite easily. Even my power has its limits,” said the witch with a smile. For a moment, she looked almost pleased to know that.

Her smile soon vanished, however, and her face became a stiff mask. Cold, dark eyes scrutinized Reust. “I’ve given you my warning. Think it over.”

Abruptly, she opened both arms wide. Reust realized she was preparing to teleport away and cried out reflexively, “If you want me to halt the reinforcements, come ask again tomorrow! Come to me! If you don’t, I won’t do as you ask!”

He received no answer.

Without an incantation, the witch created a magical array and vanished. No trace of the woman remained as the wind whistled past.

Left in the shadow of the witch who had so enthralled his soul, Reust spent a while refusing to budge from the balcony.

At long last, he returned to his room, bereft of the desire to marshal his army the next day.

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When he first met her, she was just a baby sleeping in her crib.

Her skin was as white as snow and soft to the touch. He remembered thinking that her eyelashes were incredibly long.

It was the baby taken from her home to be his royal bride. It took several years before Lanak realized what all the sealing ornaments on her ears and fingers meant. By that point, she'd grown into a frighteningly beautiful young girl—and the strangeness of her talent was beginning to become apparent to all who met her.

He'd always thought of her as a girl he ought to protect, until their paths diverged.

"…The Allied Forces of the Four Great Nations? How very ostentatious," the king of Cuscull commented lightly, as if this didn't concern him in the slightest.

Sprawled on his throne, Lanak examined the ceiling languidly. The empty throne room had no furnishings. The Cuscull palace was splendidly crafted, but it was lacking in a certain sense of history that other countries had.

The same was true of its monarch. His face devoid of fear or anger, Lanak complained, "They struggle pointlessly. Everything will settle where it's supposed to be in time."

"Your Majesty. As ordered, we've completed all corresponding preparations," reported a mage kneeling before the throne. Lanak pointed at the deserted hall. At once, blue lines drew up a floating map of the mainland. The other mages fell silent as they scrutinized it.

There were five glowing lights on the map. Each was connected to the others by glowing lines, which branched out into even more lines that spanned the entire continent.

It was a wondrous sight, and Lanak broke into a smile. "This shall be our new country."

Upon hearing the king's words, the mages gazed at the map with longing.

Most people could tell that the intricate lines overlaying the map were a magic spell. Once they did, they shuddered at the scale of it. No spell spanning the entire mainland had ever been attempted before. The proposal of such a thing would only earn the one who thought it up a chorus of laughter.

Lanak trusted himself to be the only one capable of bringing such an impossible feat into the realm of reality. Once it was done, the lives of all

would change overnight. He regarded his spell map with great satisfaction. “This will erase all suffering and create a world far more suitable to live in.”

The mages gazed at their king reverently, overcome with emotion. One brought up a hesitant objection, however.

“B-but is such a spell really possible…?”

“It’s all right. We have Aeti,” the king replied.

Just then, the door to the throne room opened and the black-clad witch entered.

Her looks were so stunning, it was like she’d walked out of a painting. After realizing she’d attracted everyone’s attention, she lifted her long eyelashes and bobbed her head in a light bow. As expressionless as a doll, she asked the king, “What’s going on, Lanak?”

“I was just talking about you. Will you help me transform our land?”

“Help you? Of course,” she answered breezily, then crossed the room with perfect composure and sat down on a couch that lined the wall. It was a usual spot for her and was located only a dozen paces from the throne. Leaning against the armrest, she began to read a book.

Lanak gazed at her calmly. “No matter how complicated and large a spell is, it must still abide by the basic laws. As long as you have enough magic, all you have to do is cast each spell one by one. Isn’t that right, Aeti? I taught you that a long time ago.”

“Yes, because you were instructed on that principle long before I was,” she said with a smile, not looking up from her book.

The two had been raised in the same castle, both as potential rulers. While that had been four centuries ago, to Lanak it may as well have happened yesterday. Unlike the witch, who was very much aware of everything that’d happened in the intervening time, Lanak had spent much of the last four hundred years in a magically induced stasis. He was spelled to sleep while he enjoyed a light, all-but-eternal dream.

At times, Lanak could sense the witch’s familiar nearby but was unable to react. The powerful magic needed to fuel the stasis spell had left his body half-broken from the recoil.

Despite that, he had seemingly returned whole. The long sleep had made his memories and thoughts hazy, but he hadn’t forgotten what was most important.

Protecting her. That was his role, and it hadn’t changed since he was a child.

“You were such an obedient, good student that the tutors always praised you. During breaks, all you did was follow me around, but you learned everything I taught you right away…”

Aeti was five years younger than Lanak. In the early days, she was little more than a child clinging to him, but her talent had been undeniable even then.

It was more than just natural ability, though. She also put in fierce effort but so did Lanak.

“You were very clever. In just a few years, the tutors no longer had anything to teach you…”

By the time she was ten, she’d surpassed all her instructors. Her many tutors all withdrew voluntarily, and she was left in solitude. Lanak was the only one in the entire castle who dared to reach out to her.

“But compared with me, you were always so much more…”

The light in Lanak’s eyes dimmed. His gaze was hollow as he looked at the witch who had once been a potential ruler of the empire, just as he had been.

Tinasha was the first to notice the shift in Lanak, and she watched him intently.

As if poised to take action at any time, as if making sure of something…

The other mages stood petrified by the look in her eyes. Her voice alone was gentle as she asked, “Lanak? What’s wrong? Did you remember something?”

When he heard her voice, Lanak blinked slowly. At some point, his temples and hands had begun to sweat.

A lingering chill ran through his body, as if he’d stumbled across something deeply unpleasant, and he took deep breaths to calm himself. “It’s no good. It’s like I’m still in the dream,” he admitted.

“It wasn’t a dream,” Tinasha urged.

“I know.”

Lanak’s home country had been destroyed. Four hundred years later, he built a new one. That much was real.

From time to time, however, he had the oddest sensation that he was forgetting something. It was some sort of lingering emotion he hadn’t quite parsed.

Lanak asked the girl who was once so small, “Aeti, are you upset?”

“About what?” Tinasha said, her gaze back on her book. Long black locks swept over the floor, and she looked just like a blooming flower. This witch truly captivated all who looked upon her. She was all grown up now, and Lanak felt both pleased and somewhat lonely to see her as she was now.

Gazing at her, Lanak waved his hand lightly. Upon seeing his dismissive gesture, the other mages cleared out immediately. Once they were alone, Lanak started again. “About what happened four hundred years ago. On the last night we were together.”

It was a subject neither had broached since their reunion. Tinasha was a little surprised to hear him bring it up. With a panther’s fluid grace, she slowly sat up and looked at him. “Why now, after all this time? I thought you’d forgotten.”

“I’ll never forget.”

Even though most of his memories were a fuzzy jumble, that night was something he’d never forget. The shock and fear on her face when he’d cut into her stomach were seared into his mind. Screams, sobs, and pitiful begs echoed in his ears.

On the other hand, however, Lanak couldn't recall how it had felt to look down on her then. It was all faint, worn away by the long sleep, and he couldn't get that part of the memory back.

"I thought you might be upset. I've been wondering."

"I'm not upset," Tinasha answered curtly, as if to say that was the end of the conversation. She resumed her reading.

That was a clear rejection. Lanak had no choice but to change the subject. "Do you think if we suppress them with huge amounts of power, the fighting will end?"

"I think it will, but it won't get at the root of the problem," she replied.

"But we might be able to save the people who are unhappy now," Lanak countered.

"Mm-hmm," Tinasha answered.

Unable to order his thoughts very well, Lanak pressed his fingers to his temples. The man had the faintest sense that his memories and personality were snapping apart, perhaps because he'd slept for too long. Holding himself together as he felt like he was going to fly to pieces, he gazed at his bride-to-be. She was the most powerful person on the continent.

"Once you became a witch, did you not want to do something like that yourself?" Lanak inquired.

"I didn't. That would just be self-righteous," answered Tinasha.

"Even if that meant someone died?"

"Everyone dies eventually. If I interfered in the world and prevented something from happening, it might end up killing human thought."

What Tinasha said smacked of a policy of everlasting total noninterference, and it sounded cruel. Such was the road she had chosen, however. Lanak, who only knew how kind and sweet she was to everything and everyone, felt a little lonely again.

"Is what I'm trying to do also self-righteous?" he asked.

"Yes."

"That's cold."

"Then you shouldn't have asked." Tinasha laughed, and then her face turned serious. "But because you summoned me, I was able to interfere in the conflict between Tayiri and the mages a little."

"Aeti."

"So thank you. I mean it," Tinasha concluded, a smile on her face. If this was her real smile, then what wasn't real?

Lanak broke into a smile, too. "If it made you happy, I'm glad."

Breaking a cycle of tragedy required action. *And the time for it is now*, Lanak reminded himself. Heaving a huge sigh, he turned his gaze up to the ceiling.

"You don't need to worry about a thing. I'll protect you."

Even if the whole world shunned and feared Tinasha for being a witch, he would be on her side. If he didn't do that, then she would be all alone, just like when she was a little girl.

Lanak repeated his vow as though a command to himself. “I’ll protect you, Aeti.”

Perhaps that sentiment was the one thing that hadn’t faded from Lanak’s mind after four hundred years.

Tinasha was no longer a little girl, but things were still the same. Aeterna would forever be a weak and helpless person who existed for him.

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“I’m going to sleep for a bit,” Lanak declared. He then retired to his chambers.

Tinasha departed from the throne room shortly afterward.

As soon as she reached the corridor, she was joined by her guard, Renart.

He looked concerned. “The king seemed a little…”

“He’s fine. I don’t think he’s awakened from his dream yet.”

“His dream?”

Among those in the castle, Renart and Pamyra were the only two mages assigned to serve Tinasha. They had won her trust and had a rough idea of what happened to her in the past. It was because of that knowledge that Renart had come to the throne room fearing the king had done something to hurt Tinasha, but the witch quickly brushed that concern aside.

“Renart, do you know why the witches of this land are all women?”

“What? Er… Is it not because they’re witches, not wizards?” he asked, anticipating that she was setting up a pun of some sort, but Tinasha laughed and shook her head.

“You’re quite a strong mage yourself, but the truth of the matter is that men’s bodies are unstable in terms of magical power. It’s difficult for them to survive for long periods of time with vast amounts of magic. A normal life span is not long enough for negative effects to manifest, but hundreds of years will take their toll on a man’s mind or body. It causes a breakdown. That’s why there are no men among witches. To come as far as we have would mean self-destruction for them.”

Tinasha said such frightening things so flippantly. Renart attempted a smile but found himself unable to muster one.

“Which means the king is…” He trailed off.

“His mental faculties have deteriorated. While he used a magical sleep, he still suffered quite a bit. His mind comes and goes, but it’s all focused around his mental state when he was fifteen. He’s very unstable. That’s why he’s being so sweet to me. To him, I will forever be the powerless child I was back then.”

A self-deprecating expression crossed Tinasha’s face. Renart frowned at the sight of it.

The witch only ever spoke of her past with a glibness to her tone.

Even that told him something, though. Namely that a long time ago, Tinasha adored Lanak as if he really was her family. Now that her big

brother was back, as kind as he ever was, Renart wondered what Tinasha was thinking. While he was worried, he found himself incapable of discerning even some small part of the witch's true intentions. Deciding on another course of action, Renart asked about something else. "Is what the king said really possible? A spell that spans our entire land…"

"It is, if we use my magic," Tinasha replied. She answered so matter-of-factly that it left Renart stunned. With a hand, the witch flipped her long, braided hair back. "We're talking about using magic to completely control the continent. People in the past may have conceived of this, but none saw it successfully realized. In terms of sheer ability, the first king of Tuldarr should have had the power to do it. He was the only one who had all twenty spirits at his beck and call, after all. But spell casting at that time was much more difficult than it is now. That may have been what prevented him. Spell-casting research didn't know many advancements until the time of the fourth regent."

"Ah, er, Lady Tinasha—" Renart cut in. If he let her continue unchecked, she'd go off on a tangent about the history of Tuldarr.

She realized what he meant and gave a little cough. "It's possible; but if we do it, it will irreparably alter the mainland. Smaller countries might collapse, and it would mean all-out war with the Four Great Nations. Lanak would never stand for that, though. Depending on how things go, we could see a death toll that exceeds the Dark Age."

"You mean…"

This was definitely an unprecedented state of affairs. Renart shuddered to realize he was standing at a turning point in history.

The witch remained unperturbed, however. Evidently remembering something, Tinasha suddenly changed the topic. "Oh yes, how are you coming along with what I asked you to do?"

"I'll have the forty obsidian stones for you by today. Tomorrow at the latest."

The witch had asked him to find stones of a deep color possessed of as few imperfections as possible.

Tinasha nodded. "Just to be safe, you should make yourself your own defensive array, too."

Renart inclined his head in silence. While he wasn't a suicidal man, he felt he should give priority to his lady, not himself. Despite the fact that he'd so brazenly thrust his vow of loyalty on her, she'd smiled and accepted it. Renart intended to repay Tinasha no matter what it took.

"Now what could you two be discussing?" wondered a new voice that slithered from behind the shadow of a pillar.

It was an oily, clinging sort of sound. As its owner emerged, Renart scowled without realizing it. There stood Chief Mage Bardalos. The king had forbidden people in the castle from having excessive contact with Tinasha, but Bardalos took every opportunity to engage with her.

For someone like him with such a bloody past, the fact that Tinasha had such immense magical power residing in such a slender body caught his attention and incited a sadistic interest. He made no attempt to hide his desire, and Tinasha stared him down with eyes as cold as ice.

"I'm thinking of making a necklace. I asked him to gather some stones," she stated, inclining her head back at the foul man.

Bardalos's lips curved up in a smirk. "A necklace, eh…? Yes, obsidian would look very nice against your hair and eyes. But shouldn't a bride wear a different color? Like pearly white…or garnet red?"

"I'm not sure about red for a bride," the witch replied, trying to pass by Bardalos. He stepped squarely in her path so as to bar her way, however. His already narrow eyes clamped down even further, giving him the countenance of a hungry reptile.

"I think red would look wonderful on you. It'll match the color of your blood. I'm really very interested in knowing just how beautiful those organs hiding inside that lovely body of yours are."

"Go ask Lanak," Tinasha spat scathingly.

Even Renart didn't quite understand what that meant. He glanced at her, but she appeared as cool and unaffected as always.

"Get out of the way," ordered the witch. "Or if you're a baby who can't walk on his own, perhaps I'll move you myself."

A gleeful smile spreading on his face, Bardalos took a step back and cleared the way. Sensing that something was off about that, Renart shielded his lady with his body as they passed by.

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After the defeat at the Asdra Plains, Tayiri ultimately decided to hold off on sending reinforcements to Cuscull. At Prince Reust's orders, the troops were assembled but detained in the capital.

Additionally, armies from the other major powers that had heeded Tayiri's call began to arrive.

For four days, Oscar had joined war conferences in Tayiri's castle, and he was quickly growing fed up. He had suffered through many meetings, and not a single one had resulted in dispatch orders. Prince Reust was the biggest obstacle. Despite holding primary military authority, he merely parroted the words "*We need to act carefully*." Oscar was close to the end of his rope and wanted to point out that it was Tayiri who asked for help fighting in the first place.

As if that weren't bad enough, Reust's younger sister, Cecelia, followed Oscar around every day, testing the limits of his self-control. Finally, he turned an exasperated look on the gorgeous princess and asked, "What do you think you're doing here?"

"Am I not allowed to say it's because I wanted to see you?" she replied with a sweet smile. Looking at her was enough to give Oscar a headache. His mind full of cynical thoughts, he stared back at the young woman.

The two were in his guest suite in Tayiri Castle. It was a little after sunset, and the sky had darkened to match the deep blue shade of Oscar's eyes. *Later, I am going to lecture the hell out of whoever let this woman into my room*, thought Oscar as he bit back a sigh.

His obvious annoyance must have shown in his attitude, because Cecelia arched an eyebrow, got to her feet, and sauntered over to him. Leaning against the armrest, she moved her poisonous red lips to whisper in his ear, "Don't make that face. When you act so cold to me, it gives me certain thoughts."

"Oh? Like what?"

"That mage woman who followed you around in Farsas—that was the Witch of the Azure Moon, wasn't it? It could be quite damaging to your position if I was to make that known," she breathed. The look in her eyes was challenging, and Oscar pasted on a smile in return.

He'd known someone was liable to deduce that eventually, but how had Cecelia managed it? The eyewitness report Tayiri had received spoke only of a beautiful woman with dark hair and eyes. Women of Tinasha's exact coloring were rare, but it wasn't as if they didn't exist. A single onlooker's testimony wasn't enough to go on.

"So? Feeling a bit differently now?" Cecelia purred. She peered at Oscar while gleefully enjoying her advantage. Looping her arms around his neck, Cecelia snuggled close to him. Her perfume was cloyingly sweet. Oscar tipped up her chin and drew closer. Then he pressed his lips to hers.

It was not a short kiss, and it was soul melting in its intensity. Intoxicated with her victory, Cecelia drank of it deeply. After a while, Oscar pulled back to murmur in her ear, his low voice reverberating through her body. "Why do you think that? It could have been someone who looks like her."

"You won't be able to weasel your way out that easily… I saw her myself. There's no way I'm mistaken."

Oscar trailed his fingers along Cecelia's white neck. He could feel her blood pumping under her soft skin.

"Where? I don't believe you," he said.

At that, she let out a shrill laugh. "Do you truly desire that enchantress that much? She's a witch, so I suppose she uses magic to make men into her slaves. She visits my brother every night, you know. What a trollop she is. I don't think she even knows I'm watching."

"…What?"

Oscar almost crushed Cecelia's windpipe in his hands. Restraining himself just before he did, he pushed her off and got to his feet. Cecelia was left in a daze, and he grabbed her chin and forced it upward. He stared down at her, no trace of sweetness in his gaze at all.

"Tell me where Prince Reust's room is," Oscar demanded in a tone that was not to be disobeyed.

Reust had asked the witch to come back the next day, but in truth he hadn't actually expected that she would.

Against all expectations, however, she did indeed return the following night and the one after. She floated beneath the moon, seemingly just out of reach.

Each time she visited, she explained to Reust how foolish it was to discriminate against others. Sometimes she used roundabout comparisons, while other times she was more direct and brought home how truly hurtful it was. Not once did she look down on Reust or plead with him. Her voice remained ever calm and plain. The witch never remained too long, either. When she was finished answering his questions, she vanished.

Reust never wanted their time to end, though. Each night he would insist, "If you don't come tomorrow, I'll send out the troops."

How much better would it have been if he could have said, *I want to see you again; I want to talk with you*? Unfortunately, the woman he longed to see was a despicable mage of an enemy country. Saying such a thing was tantamount to betraying the history of Tayiri. Reust absolutely refused to cross that line, even if he'd been the one to set it for himself.

Despite that, even Reust himself could tell he was wavering. He didn't know if it was because of her or because of what she told him, but as their conversations continued, he began to falter in his belief that mages needed to be killed.

Only three days remained before the two-week grace period the witch had set ended.

If he could hold off his troops until then, something would surely change.

Reust went out onto his balcony and looked up at the night sky. Just then, someone knocked on his door.

"Reust… It's me," came Cecelia's voice. While he was suspicious of why she was visiting him so late, he went back inside and unlocked the door.

He tensed in shock.

Behind his pale-faced sister stood the young king of Farsas, sword in hand. A tiny red dragon was perched on his shoulder.

With effort, Reust squeaked out the words, "…What do you want…?"

"Was it not your country who asked that we slay the witch?"

There was a provocative look in Oscar's eyes. Reust gleaned the man's meaning, and his whole body froze. He stood there petrified, and Oscar slipped past him into the room. He went right for the balcony, and Reust chased after him in a panic. Sensing that Oscar's attention was no longer on her, Cecelia beat a hasty retreat.

"Stop! What is the meaning of this?" Reust shouted at the intruder on his balcony.

"Play dumb, and this is only going to make you look bad," Oscar replied indifferently, drawing Akashia. The blade caught the moonlight and glittered an argent shade. A sword that killed mages. Tayiri could not have wished to own a finer weapon.

In that moment, Reust regarded that blade as the most accursed thing he had ever seen. Everything inside him screamed not to let the witch face her natural enemy. How was he to warn her, though?

While Reust was thrown into confusion, Oscar stared up at the sky. The air beneath the moon began to twist and warp.

“Don’t come over here!” Reust yelled up at the sky.

Oscar opened his mouth to cry the witch’s name.

However, the woman with dark blond hair who appeared was one neither recognized.

“I wondered where you were going every night. Is that really what you were doing?!”

“Yes…”

Pamyra was appalled, while the witch looked disillusioned. Tinasha leaned against the back of her chair and grumbled replies to the woman hurling a litany of questions at her.

“He doesn’t *seem* that stupid. but he has some comprehension problems… He always says, ‘I don’t understand, so come back tomorrow.’ It’s proving entirely too difficult to change his beliefs. I give up.”

Pamyra watched Tinasha stretch as she voiced several complaints. A wave of heavy exhaustion crashed over her, and she let out a sigh. “You don’t have to listen to him, you know. You’re too easily swayed by pressure.”

“I’m sorry…,” Tinasha said, hanging her head guiltily. She picked up one of the obsidian stones laid out on the table. Next to her, Renart was polishing them as he shook his head in disbelief.

Pamyra planted both hands on her hips in a show of indignation. As soon as Tinasha told her the whole story, she knew that the crown prince of Tayiri had fallen for the witch. The only one who hadn’t realized that appeared to be the witch herself. Pamyra wanted to tell the prince off for daring to request continued meetings Tinasha. The witch was a busy woman. She didn’t have time for fools.

“But if I can soften his attitude, I’m sure it’ll help those mages of the future.” Tinasha mumbled as she turned over a piece of obsidian. “Mages can be born of non-magical parents. There will be no end to tragedy unless Tayiri changes its ways.” She lamented the situation even as she sighed.

Pamyra and Renart grasped their lady’s intent and felt heat rise to their chests.

If mages were born only to magical parents, Tayiri’s history of oppression would have ended a long time ago. All magic-using families could have left the nation, and Tayiri would be free of magic.

The trouble was, magical aptitude wasn’t determined purely by blood. About half of those children born with magic ended up hurting themselves or their surroundings if they didn’t learn how to control their powers. The seeds of tragedy could be sown anywhere in the world.

A faint smile on her face, Pamyra faced her lady with a gentle expression. “In any case, tonight you should focus on creating magic implements. We don’t have much time left, so I will go to the Tayiri prince and put an end to this. Tell me the transportation coordinates.”

“Put an end to what…?”

“……..”

While baffled at just how clueless her lady could be, Pamyra succeeded in obtaining the necessary information for the teleport. Tinasha watched Pamyra with concern as she drew the array. “If something happens to you, I will come.”

“You don’t need to worry. Renart! Please keep a close eye on Lady Tinasha!”

“I would’ve done so anyway,” he answered.

With that, Pamyra transported herself to Tayiri’s royal castle. After appearing aloft in the night sky, she peered down and spied a castle, its gardens, and the crown prince’s balcony.

Two men stood on it—and one of them was holding a sword Pamyra had seen in books.

“The royal sword of Akashia…the Mage Killer…”

What strange string of events had led the wielder of such a deadly weapon here?

Pamyra didn’t have to ponder the answer.

“You plotted this!” she cried. Her head flushed with heated anger, and she threw her hands out in front of herself.

A powerful light bloomed before her palms and quickly began to spread. The woman who’d teleported in had immediately recognized Akashia and was filled with rage. A white glow burst forth from her hands.

Clicking his tongue in irritation, Oscar swung his sword once and dispelled the magic. “Nark! Capture her!” he commanded the dragon on his shoulder.

Heeding the royal decree, the little scaly thing immediately began to grow larger. Mid-flight it expanded to the size of a small house, raking its sharp talons at the woman. Staggering in the sky, the woman threw up a short incantation to protect herself. At the same time, Oscar flung a dagger at her legs.

The hurled knife was one of Oscar’s usual maneuvers against mages who floated in the air. Its aim wasn’t to cause heavy injury. All it had to do was interrupt the woman’s concentration. Most magic users weren’t able to stay aloft after their focus was interrupted.

To Oscar’s surprise, the blond woman countered that upset with another spell. Clearly this was a fairly capable mage.

Nark seized upon its opportunity in that instant and battered her with one of its giant wings.

“Ngh, ahhh!” Although the woman shrieked in pain, she remained hovering. The dragon circled around to claw at her again. Just before its talons caught flesh, there came another rippling and twisting of air.

The next moment…a new woman appeared in the sky.

Throwing up a defensive wall to repel the dragon’s talons, she let out a cry of surprise. “Nark?!”

Her jet-black locks rippled in the evening breeze. Her slender body glowed a pearl-white shade in the moonlight.

Slowly, she turned to look at the balcony. Her eyes clearly fixed on one of the men there.

Looking thunderstruck, she spoke his name.

“Oscar…”

“Come here,” he insisted irritably, reaching out to her.

At the offer of his hand, Tinasha froze in midair.

She knew he was staying at Tayiri Castle but hadn’t expect to encounter him. Some small part of her had been anticipating that they’d run into each other like this, though.

Stupefied, she stared at the man she’d once shared a contract with.

His blue eyes had the power to arrest her. Entirely effortlessly, all her memories of when she’d smiled and laughed in his arms came rushing back. It hadn’t been that long ago, but it all felt incredibly nostalgic now.

Tinasha’s lips quivered. If nothing had happened, she might have taken his hand.

Before she ever had the chance, another voice broke her trance.

“Run! Now!”

Reust unsheathed his sword and slashed at Oscar, who parried it easily with Akashia. Tinasha remained unmoving. Pamyra hurriedly grabbed her lady’s shoulder and declared, “Lady Tinasha, we must go!”

Pamyra looked up at the sky, and a transportation array floated up. It was a gate meant to transport multiple people. Renart’s head popped out from the complex magic pattern.

“I can’t hold it for long! Please hurry!” he urged.

Pamyra seized Tinasha and ascended with her. Nark was confused by the appearance of its former owner and looked to Oscar for new orders. After knocking Reust’s sword out of his hands, Oscar shouted, “Tinasha!”

In the last moments before Pamyra and Renart pulled the witch into the array and out of sight, she threw Oscar a terribly anxious look.

Grinding his teeth in frustration, Oscar stared at the now-empty spot in the sky where the mages had vanished.

That was his one chance…and he’d missed it.

He needed to get her back. If he had her, everything else would work out. He’d talk to her, and they could come up with a compromise.

Unforeseen interference had sent Oscar back to square one, however. Tamping down the irritation burning him up from the inside, Oscar put Akashia back in its sheath.

Nark had miniaturized, and Oscar patted it on the head to thank it for a job well done. Then he glared at Reust. “Why don’t you explain what’s been going on?”

Reust licked his dry lips.

The moon was red.

A day of reckoning had come as silently as any other.

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“Lady Tinasha, are you hurt?” Pamyra asked, looking Tinasha over with concern once they teleported back to the witch’s room in Cuscull.

All the blood had drained from the witch’s face, and she stared blankly at Pamyra and Renart. After a while, she answered, “I’m fine, but what about you?”

“The dragon’s wing just bumped against me a little. Please don’t worry about it.”

The witch heard that and sagged to the floor in exhaustion.

Renart rushed to kneel in front of Pamyra. “Are you really okay? You don’t feel unwell?”

“No, I’m fine… It was just a bit of a shock. That’s all,” assured Pamyra.

Frowning, Renart asked his lady, “You know the swordsman of Akashia?”

Tinasha gave a little jolt at that. Some unnamed emotion welled up in her dark eyes.

“That’s my… He’s a man I once signed a contract with. I trained him so he’d be…able to kill me.”

There was something Tinasha wanted to leave in this world, for the history that was yet to come.

Oscar had given that to her. He was the king who would build a new era.

The witch said nothing more. She closed her eyes and similarly shut out the feeling building within her.

The next day, the Allied Forces began their march to Cuscull.

6. The Dream Is Over

“Aeti, where are you?”

He called her name.

The spacious castle of Tuldarr was formed entirely of cold stone. The people who walked its halls were like crafted dolls. No one turned to look at him. They didn’t see him.

With one exception—her.

“Aeti?”

Lanak peeked into an alabaster hall. There was the girl who would be his bride, standing in the middle of an empty room.

Her slender arms were outstretched, and a finely woven spell burst forth like a flower blooming. Suddenly, it expanded to fill the entire chamber, and Lanak was struck breathless.

The spell was intricate and expansive, the height of craftsmanship.

No matter how Lanak stared, he couldn’t understand it. He couldn’t parse it. Her power far outstripped his.

It was all he could do to stand there in shock. Finally, she noticed he was there and turned around, giving him a sweet smile. “What is it, Lanak?”

“…Aeti.”

Lanak had come because he wanted to see her. In this cold and quiet castle, she was his only friend and ally.

His teachers had appeared unenthusiastic for a while now. After many days of feeling stifled, wondering what had changed, he learned that her tutors had all gone.

That’s why he’d wanted to see her. He’d planned to comfort her and tell her that he’d be the one to stick with her no matter how lonely she was.

But now…he knew.

Her power was the reason she was lonely. No one could teach her anything. That was why her tutors left, and it was also why everyone lost interest in him.

…She would be the one to inherit the throne of Tuldarr.

Surely everyone was thinking it. This delicate, lonely girl would be the next queen.

She'd shown up after Lanak, yet at some point she'd far outpaced him.

If that truly came to pass, he would—

"Lanak?"

She was looking at him with her dark eyes. The eyes of the powerful. The gaze of a pure person who knew nothing.

Lanak swallowed down the bile rising in his throat…and smiled. "It's nothing, Aeti."

Even so, he was the only one who could protect her. He had to.

She still knew nothing, after all, and she was so alone in this castle.

"…Lanak, wake up."

Her voice was in his ears. She gently shook him awake.

Scenes of the distant past fading before him, Lanak blinked his eyes open. A woman was staring at him, and he focused on her.

"…Aeti?" he murmured by reflex, and she frowned the littlest bit. Her face was that of an adult, one he didn't know. He always felt slightly uncomfortable looking at it. Letting out a deep breath, he straightened his posture on the throne where he'd dozed off.

"I suppose I was…dreaming," he said.

"What kind of dream?"

"A dream of the past. When you were still a little girl…I think."

He meant when she was still a helpless child. Lanak racked his brain trying to recall the rest of the memory that was growing hazy with each passing second.

At his words, the woman merely made a curious expression. "How odd. Anyway, it's already a new day."

All the preparations had been made for their move to reform the continent. Emotions ran deep in Lanak's eyes as he looked at the woman. "It's all thanks to you. Now the land can be at peace. Mages will live their lives without fear."

Tuldarr had fallen long ago and would never return. There was no point in reclaiming its throne. That country had not chosen Lanak.

That was why he made a new country for himself. One that would ensure the oppressed could live peaceful lives in the future.

The witch, once a little girl, narrowed her eyes as she smiled. "If that is what you wish."

If not for her, Lanak's ideas wouldn't have become reality. She had the power to change all his visions into something real. That was the one thing he hadn't obtained, no matter how hard he'd wished—

"…Aeti."

"Yes?"

The low timbre of his whispered call was answered quite innocently.

Her reply brought him back to himself. He didn't know what he'd been thinking or what he was trying to say. Something bitter had been spreading inside his heart. That much he was sure of.

“I’ll protect you, Aeti,” Lanak said, as much to remind himself as the woman.

Now that she’d been reduced to a witch, he would protect her from others. He had to. She was now a wretched creature, shunned and despised by all.

Lanak nodded with satisfaction at his own answer.

However, the bitter taste in his mouth had yet to fully go away.

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Nearly fifty thousand troops gathered from the Four Great Nations teleported to a fortress to the west of Tayiri.

The number might’ve seemed excessive considering they were only going up against a few hundred Cuscull mages, but when faced with an opponent of unknown strength, it felt necessary.

Oscar had successfully coerced the full story out of Reust and was livid to discover that the Tayiri prince had been so easily manipulated into wasting time. The day the witch had asked Reust to wait for was the following day. The only hope now was to move out immediately in the hope of catching Cuscull before its mages could enact whatever plan they’d concocted.

At sunset, Oscar, still fuming, met with the generals at the gates of the fortress. They discussed their marching route for the next day. During the meeting, Oscar glanced up and happened to spy Sylvia running toward him. Panting and gasping, she hurried to her king’s side and delivered a report.

“Your Majesty, the scouts recovered a civilian girl. Apparently, she was attacked by the mages on the road leading from here to Cuscull. Everyone’s gathering in the council room right now. You should come, too.”

The girl’s name was Luly.

She survived the burning of her village that sat near the Cuscull border. A kindly mage living secluded in the woods had taken her in, but the two had been separated after nearly being discovered by Cuscull forces. She was found by the enemy as she made her way to the fortress, and they gave chase. Oscar found himself deeply impressed as he listened intently to the tale on his way to the council room.

“I can’t believe she’s unhurt after all that.”

“Perhaps the Cuscull pursuers were merciful because she’s a child. In any case, you should hear it directly from her.”

When they reached the council room, Sylvia opened the door for her king. Oscar entered and joined a number of other royals and commanders from other countries.

Encircled by these powerful people was the young girl. Immediately, her eyes lit up as they fixed themselves on Oscar. “It’s the prince! You’re really here!”

“…I’m not a prince…,” Oscar muttered out of habit but then decided it wasn’t worth making a point of.

The girl had evidently heard his whispering, however. “Yes, you are! She showed me. She said you were really strong!”

“Showed you? Who showed you?”

“The lady who saved me from the bad magicians. She was *really* pretty. I couldn’t stop crying, so she told me all kinds of stories. She showed me lots of stuff. She put her hand on my forehead, and I could see all these scenes like they were really happening.”

It was a childish explanation, but a bell began to ring in Oscar’s mind. He sank to his knees and looked the child square in the eye. “Did she have black hair?”

“Yeah. And black eyes. With no light at all, like nighttime.”

He’d expected that answer and let out a little sigh. “Damn that elusive woman…”

Standing back up, he placed a hand on top of the thoroughly exhausted-looking little girl’s head.

She’d been chased by mages, saved by a witch, and found on a prairie an hour’s ride from the fortress.

The troops departed at dawn and paused their march almost immediately to send out mages as scouts. They couldn’t afford to walk right into a trap like what’d happened on the Asdra Plains.

Before long, the mages returned and expressed that nothing seemed peculiar or amiss.

Doan was one of the scouts, and Oscar gestured for him to come speak privately outside the tent.

“Is that true?” Oscar asked. “Nothing?”

“Actually, we could sense some faint magic in the vicinity but didn’t detect any spells. That said…if Miss Tinasha set a spell, I don’t think any of us would’ve been able to sense it anyway,” Doan replied.

“I see. I thought so,” said Oscar.

The others were wrapping up their discussion, having decided to press on straight through. If they detoured now, they wouldn’t be able to cross into Cuscull on the same day. Even if it was a trap, the best course was moving straight ahead.

As Oscar was deliberating over the situation, a young woman piped up from behind him. “I do wish you keep moving after asking me for a favor.”

“…Here’s just the person I was looking for,” Oscar said, turning around to find the Witch of the Forbidden Forest pouting.

Hands on her hips, Lucrezia glared at Oscar. “I went to look at all the towns and cities! It was a lot of trouble, you know!”

“Sorry. So what did you find?”

Passing soldiers and commanders glanced over with interest at the beautiful lady having a hushed conversation with the king of Farsas. Oscar and Lucrezia continued undaunted, though.

“A bit of this, a bit of that,” she answered. “It certainly looks like our girl has done something extraordinary. While the citizens appear to have

vanished, she's actually just delayed their time to the extreme and placed them in a pseudo time-suspended state. On top of that, she's put up a defensive barrier around them and taken away their sense of awareness. They aren't gone. They're all still there, even now. Perceptive humans should be able to sense them."

"Ah, I see…," Oscar said, remembering how Suzuto had reported the feeling that something was there. Now that Lucrezia had explained it, Oscar understood the cities were essentially full of invisible, intangible people. Tinasha had somehow managed this incredible feat across eight cities simultaneously. He was struck all over again by how fearsome the Witch of the Azure Moon was.

Full of admiration for Tinasha, the king asked, "Can you undo it?"

"No way, that would be too much work. Besides, she's arranged it so that it will wear off naturally with the passage of time. It's due to expire in another hour, in fact," Lucrezia explained.

"Seriously?!"

"Seriously. Okay, I'll be going now."

"Hold on a second."

Lucrezia lifted her arms to teleport away, but Oscar grabbed one. She gave him a quizzical look.

"I'm sorry, but since you're here, I'd like you to tell me if Tinasha has cast some sort of magic ahead."

"Why me?"

"No one else can."

Only a fellow witch possessed the skill necessary to detect Tinasha's spell craft.

Lucrezia retorted coolly, "No matter what's out there, you can't afford any detours. So it hardly makes a difference. Rest assured, it's not anything that will kill you." Then she stuck out her tongue. Evidently, she already knew what sort of spell lay waiting on their path.

Oscar sighed. "So there really is something. Nothing good comes of having Tinasha for an enemy."

"If you really understood that, you wouldn't have asked me for help. You've got enough on your plate just dealing with her. If she finds out I was involved, too, things will only get worse. Do you want to wring your own neck?"

"I'm not in a position that affords choosiness. For now, I can only deal with things as they come."

Oscar felt pretty sure he could find a way to silence the other countries. Lucrezia picked up on his implicit meaning and gazed at him in astonishment. "Stop acting so inflexible. It'll backfire on you later. If anything, I'm giving preference to what she wants far more than you are."

"Giving preference? She's acting with total disregard for her own interests," Oscar shot back.

“Even so, I can’t help you more than I have. You’ll have to figure something out on your own,” Lucrezia declared. Her words were harsh but fair. Oscar scowled.

Lucrezia gave him information but refused to get directly involved. That was her line in the sand. While it looked like she was forsaking Oscar, she was actually respecting human freedom.

Oscar understood that and nodded, accepting that he wasn’t going to get his way. “Fine. I’ll figure something out myself.”

“What a good boy you are,” teased the grinning witch. Her smile quickly melted away, however. She turned very serious, far more so than Oscar had ever seen before. In a low voice, she said, “She won’t protect herself. You must be her shield.”

“…I know.”

“I’m very glad she has you at this turning point,” Lucrezia admitted, a hazy fondness passing over her amber eyes. The emotion was gone after a single blink, and Lucrezia smiled as wide as she ever had. “Work hard and do your best.”

After issuing some rather light words of encouragement, she was gone. Oscar had the distinct feeling that two witches had him in the palms of their hands. He took a breath to recenter himself, and then he went back into the tent.

In the end, it was decided that the fifty thousand troops would proceed as planned along the original route, although they suspected a trap.

In expectation of the worst, the royals and commanders were to all ride in the very middle of the formation, however. This included Oscar, who let his other generals lead the march while he surrounded himself with Als, Meredina, Kumu, Doan, Kav, and Sylvia, among others. As long as he had them near him, he knew he’d be able to weather whatever happened. Even if it was a magical trap.

Much to the surprise of many, nothing extraordinary happened during the first hour of marching. The commanders gradually began to relax in the face of the uneventful monotony.

As the procession soldiered onward, a messenger came running from a battalion stationed at the vanguard.

“No matter how far we go, our surroundings stay the same.”

Upon hearing that, Kav murmured wonderingly, “Wow… To set up a blockade of such a huge chunk of space. We had no idea we were going in circles. Fairies use similar magic in forests a lot, but this might be the first time in history that one on such a large scale has been accomplished.”

More than half of what he said sounded more like a compliment than anything, and Oscar felt a headache coming on. It was almost as if he could hear Tinasha shouting *Just go around and around in circles, then!* at him.

“Her very existence should be illegal.” Oscar groaned. “How can we break the spell?”

“Locating its essence and destroying it is the quickest way out. Judging from the scope, Miss Tinasha is not actively maintaining it now. She’s set up sigils and something to use as a core to do that for her. That’s if we can find it first—it’s impossible to see this spell.”

“I can’t see it, either,” Oscar said.

They were at a complete loss. Privately, Oscar cursed Lucrezia’s heartlessness, though only just a little.

The soldiers had halted, and from Oscar’s position in the center of the march, they seemed to be in quite the disarray. He looked around and saw that the generals, royals, and aides-de-camp were trading information and ideas on how best to escape their trap. His eyes caught sight of Reust, and Oscar made a sour face.

It was all because of Reust’s time wasting that things had gotten this bad in the first place. Oscar felt a fresh wave of irritation threaten an angry outburst.

Just as Oscar bit it back…a guest arrived.

It was a man clad in black mage’s robes. He materialized in the midst of the crowd without any forewarning, and as everyone’s heads began to turn, he bent one knee and made a sweeping bow. In a full, ringing voice, he greeted the army with all due formality.

“I believe this is our first time meeting. I am the chief mage of Cuscull, Bardalos.”

“Wha—?”

Immediately, several soldiers drew their swords. In an instant, the air was crackling with tension, and Bardalos gave an exaggerated shrug. “Ah, don’t be too hasty. If you kill me, you’ll never get out of here. This is a fine work of art crafted by the bride of our very own king. I doubt you’ll be able to get out now that you’re inside it.”

“You clown… What have you come here for?” spat out a Cezar general.

Bardalos only smiled at the attempted intimidation. He answered with theatrical flourish, as if reveling in his assigned role. “On this fine day, you are all bravely gathered here to make an offer of subordination to Cuscull. I am most extremely and humbly delighted. I would be thrilled to allow you the chance to witness our king’s great act of bringing the entire mainland under his control. If I may be so bold as to escort you…”

Bardalos wheeled around to take in everyone surrounding him.

“However, I’m afraid that I am unable to invite each and every one of you. We do have limited seating. That said… Yes, I do believe we have room for those of you who are here in this vicinity.”

“Who would go along with that?!”

“Don’t get ahead of yourself!”

Angry cries rose in reply to Bardalos’s arrogant invitation. The man paid them no mind, a masklike smile painted on his face.

Akashia in hand, Oscar stepped forward. “Fine. Take me.”

“Your Majesty?!” shrieked Kumu. At once, Bardalos flashed Oscar a pleased grin. He spread his arms wide, black robes billowing. A complicated spell appeared before him.

“Of course, I can take you… But all the rest must go as well. No one has the luxury of saying no. I’m afraid I rather need you as an audience. After all, you’re—”

The transportation array activated. The gate widened to encompass around fifty people, with Bardalos at the center. Screams and shouts of fright filled the air, muffling the latter half of Bardalos’s sentence.

“—to be the bride’s hostages.”

Bardalos sneered ominously.

The transportation spell brought them to the middle of a huge, open wasteland.

Gritty, sandy air whipped past.

They were standing in the midst of decaying ruins. A round plaza thick with sand clouds was half-crumbled away, lined with a row of equally eroded white stone pillars. Much of the stone paving underfoot was cracked and peeling. Ten steps led up the center of the plaza to a raised section. Atop that sat an old stone altar and a suspiciously new-looking empty throne.

Oscar stood in the middle of the plaza, turning to observe everything.

“We’ve been ambushed, just like they planned,” he muttered.

Everything looked peaceful, appearing as some visage from the distant past. Along the outer edges of the plaza, an arena of circular stone steps towered over them imperiously. The weathered things looked just like petrified flower petals.

At present, the many rows of encircling steps were filled with several hundred Cuscull mages. Their chilling gazes were locked on their newly arrived guests. Mixed in among them were quite a few strange-looking creatures, including winged, mid-level demons. Presumably, these had been summoned and put to work.

Oscar gazed at the crowd calmly, but the others were frozen in place, whether out of astonishment or fear.

Keeping his eyes forward, Oscar called for one of his confidantes. “Als, what’s your take?”

“Not good. There’s way too many of them and way too few of us.”

With only fifty on Oscar’s side, a head-on battle seemed a poor choice. Oscar checked on how his other subjects were doing and then drew Akashia. Pitching his voice so they could hear, he ordered, “I have a defensive barrier, so don’t worry about me. Protect yourselves.”

No matter what happened, Oscar knew he would not die so long as Tinasha was alive. Oscar didn’t intend to let his team die, either, however, and he readjusted his grip on Akashia’s hilt.

At that moment, a man appeared at the top of the central stairway, flanked on either side by other mages.

His white hair caught the eye, and his robes were a magnificent finery unto themselves. He stepped forward with his retinue trailing in his wake. Next to the altar, Bardalos bowed to him and gave way.

Oscar fixed his eyes on the newly emerged man. “Lanak…”

When those around Oscar heard his growl, shock crossed their faces. Lanak was a historical figure from four centuries ago, but here he supposedly was looking not a day past twenty. With his abnormally pale hair and skin, it was like he’d walked out of a dream.

Lanak surveyed his audience and smiled. “Welcome to the ruins of Tuldarr’s cathedral.”

The involuntary guests all exchanged looks. Ruins of the famed Magic Empire, a country that prided itself on its exceptional power, had been sleeping here in silence throughout the centuries. Lanak took a seat on the new throne that rested amid the ruins of a country lost so tragically.

“I’ve brought you all here today to share a proposal. At our current place in history, people suffer cruel discrimination and strife. Tayiri, the foremost enemy of our nation, is the greatest example of this. Their god is unfair and fickle. His power does not reach you. Such is why people murder one another. Whether it be hate or love, they kill.”

Lanak’s voice was even, bereft of both sternness and compassion. The man appeared to be a doll parroting a learned phrase. His eyes even seemed to be made of glass as he cast them down. “But we can put an end to that. No more fighting. That will be the rule. Anyone who can’t abide by it will be punished immediately, no matter where they are on the mainland… I have the power to enforce this.”

“What?” Oscar cried without thinking. Many others were left speechless. Surely some of them doubted Lanak’s sanity. What he said was tantamount to declaring his own divinity.

Suspicion flickered in the eyes of some of the guests, who suspected Lanak of deception. The ruler of Cuscull laughed. “I’m sure you know of the five huge reservoirs of magic known as magical lakes. They are formed of natural life energy, magic, and the souls of countless humans. Right now, each one is divided, mindlessly drawing in the life force of its surroundings. But if we use a spell to connect the lakes into a network, it would form a giant web across the continent. Once we do that, I’ll be able to see everything that happens right from this very chair. Even the weather will bend according to my will. Magnificent, don’t you agree?”

…Surveillance of the mainland and control of the weather.

It was like some nightmarish future vision. If Tinasha were here, Oscar knew she’d object.

A vision of her doing just that popped into Oscar’s mind, and he let out a puff of laughter.

“Your Majesty…,” Als warned from his spot at Oscar’s side.

“Ah, I’m sorry. I’m fine. I’ll take this seriously.”

The magical lakes were formed upon Tuldarr's destruction. Originally, they were the power that Lanak was supposed to inherit but had proven too much for him to control. Now he had fashioned a new method of doing so. The demonic beast incident had taught Oscar about the power of the magical lakes. Their wild and mighty energy accidentally created that terrible creature from something never actually meant to be a weapon. If Lanak could purposely bring all the magical lakes under his control, the potential he'd possess really would rival a god's.

"He's practically insane for even thinking to try this, though."

No matter how noble Lanak's ideals were, he couldn't be allowed to spy on the entire mainland. No one knew when his self-righteousness would go off the rails.

Lanak stood from his throne and smiled. "The spell will take about an hour. Waiting might bore you, but I do want you to bear witness. This is the dawn of a new era, after all."

The king of Cuscull made sure his audience gasped in shock before breaking into a wide grin. "Now then, allow me to introduce my bride. If not for her, we could have never performed a spell of this magnitude. I'll be borrowing her power as the catalyst. Aeti, come here."

Lanak waved his right hand, opening a teleportation gate next to him. A woman emerged with three mage attendants in tow.

She was a resplendently pale creature, signifying to all that she was the bride in question. Her radiance was such that it made it easy to forget the dire circumstances at hand.

Her dress was replete with a long train crafted of multiple layers of lace. Black flowers were strung into her long, ebony hair. Her fine features would have taken a sculptor a lifetime to re-create, and her dark eyes were cast downward in melancholy.

Slowly, her lashes lifted and she cast a glance at Lanak. As she did, the audience gathered at the bottom of the stairs realized who she was and a frisson of terror ran through the crowd. Two of the three mages at her side turned pale as well. The one who didn't was a young woman who'd seen fewer years than her peers.

Bardalos smirked as he took in the bride's expression. A smile on his face, Lanak inclined his head. "What's wrong, Aeti?"

"Did you undo my spell?"

"I didn't. I helped Bardalos bring them here. I wanted them all to see."

"…Ah," Tinasha said shortly, then turned back to give a reassuring smile to the attendants that flanked her. She moved to sit down beside Lanak's throne. Midway through her motion, a rustic chair made of white stone popped into being to catch her.

Lanak placed a hand on her shoulder. Then he began to chant a slow and deliberate recitation.

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As the sound of his incantation echoed off the ancient ruins, Oscar thought about what he should do.

There was only one hour until the spell was complete. He had to do something to stop it soon.

Simply trying to kill Lanak would incur retaliation from the surrounding Cuscull mages. The other captives would no doubt be dragged into the fighting, too. Worst of all, the enemy greatly outnumbered them, ensuring that Oscar's side would lose.

"I just need an opportunity…"

Oscar looked to his shoulder and saw Nark let out a little yawn. He then turned back to stare at the woman who gave him the dragon. Her dark gaze had dropped to her feet; she refused to meet anyone's eyes. Oscar wondered what her goal was in all this.

※

Pamyra didn't let her inner turmoil show on her face and simply kept a close watch over her lady.

She'd never thought they'd summon an audience.

The mage couldn't be sure whether that had been Lanak's doing or Bardalos's, nor did she want to think about how things were going to play out with this new change to the plan.

"Give me power… Protect us…," Pamyra murmured to herself, praying to anyone who might be listening.

Lanak's chanting echoed throughout the half-rotted sanctuary.

※

Four hundred years was a long time.

It was long enough to lose your mind, but Tinasha had overcome that.

For the first century, she hadn't been able to stand to talk to anyone besides Lucrezia.

Her life had been an endless series of torments, from the loss of her country to the betrayal of the one she loved most. Even after she'd become a witch, there were those who still hunted her down, trying to gobble up everything she had. Tinasha despised everything about those who had let such terrible things happen to her.

Eventually, she succeeded in locking away her grief and resentment but gave up on trusting and loving other people in the process. Tinasha feared her searing hatred would return and bring the world to ruin if she ever dared to love anyone again.

After the completion of her tower, Tinasha began to grant audiences to those who overcame its trials. As time went on, she discovered she was starting to like people a little.

They were interesting.

Fiercely devoted.

She was envious of how their lives soared and dipped so beautifully.

So this is what humans are like, she thought. Why am I different?

How much more time would have to pass before she could die?

Was slowly whittling down her own soul really bringing her closer to what she wished for?

Life in the tower was peaceful and never changing. She was free and alone.

Tinasha never found what she was looking for, no matter how long she looked. Nor did she know why she was searching.

Her time was spent grasping at delusions.

Then it came. At last, she found the person she was searching for.

His humming voice was low and pleasant to listen to.

It was the voice that had often been her lullaby. His presence gave her the strength to bear her empty childhood. So long as that boy was with her, she could survive being driven into a detached wing of the castle for her studies.

It was a sweet voice, one that promised protection.

Tinasha closed her eyes and followed the magic that was being drawn out of her. She felt the enormous spell Lanak was weaving.

Once it was completed, everything would change. The spell he was chanting was the beginning of the end.

What she wanted lay just ahead.

※

The sight of his demolished homeland didn't inspire any longing nostalgia in Lanak.

In the Dark Age, the Magic Empire spanned a large territory, yet was also impenetrable by other countries. The king at its head commanded multiple high-ranking demons, any one of which could decimate an army. Lanak had once believed in the future that ancient Tuldarr envisioned. He had vowed to see it done.

All those feelings for his nation had died out at some point, however. Perhaps they'd vanished when he realized he was not to be chosen as ruler, or perhaps it was when Tuldarr fell. Even Lanak couldn't remember anymore.

A long sleep had worn his heart and mind thin. Even his very surroundings felt veiled and unreal as he sat on his throne. His one grip on reality remained the warmth he could feel coming off the witch he was clutching. He steadied his breathing and carefully wove together the words of the spell.

"Silence drifting on a sea of grief. Countless outstretched hands choose me. Neither morning nor night. Their eyes are everywhere."

Borrowing from Tinasha's inexhaustible wellspring of magic, Lanak crafted the spell by tying together strands of her power. As small spells threaded together, the creation turned massive.

At the same time, he reached out across the continent toward the five magical lakes, grasping and linking them. The growing spell sucked up even

more magic from the lakes and urged them into harmony with one another. Quickly, Lanak's conjuration began to extend out to every coast. Huge amounts of force pulsed and coursed, and winds began to eddy and swirl very slowly in the ruins.

Amid the growing storms, Lanak's voice crackled like thunder.

"I command the first lake that was born. I am the one who defines. I command you under the name Compassion, which brought you into being. Your location shall be daybreak."

…Lanak suddenly found himself wondering what he'd do once this was over.

He'd only ever thought to control the land through magic. He hadn't considered what to do after. He glanced at Tinasha, who was still sitting next to him.

Perhaps he'd build her a mansion here. A place where she could live in peace. She used to love her birth country. Surely that hadn't changed. Lanak wanted to grant her the relaxing days she deserved. He wanted to free her from her duties and loneliness.

"I command the second lake that was born. I am the one who defines. I command you under the name Jealousy, which brought you into being. Your location shall be morning."

Magic of this scale had never been seen in all of recorded history. The ceremony required scrupulous care. There was meaning in taking the trouble to do so, however. Once completed, there would never again be war. People, no matter who they were, would gain the right to live their lives. When he thought about it that way, even his long years of sleep seemed worthwhile.

"I command the third lake that was born. I am the one who defines. I command you under the name Denial, which brought you into being. Your location shall be noon."

At the moment, Lanak had no complaints about taking the throne.

If there was one regret he truly had, it was that he couldn't quite recall the sort of person he was in the past. He didn't know what he loved, what he hated, or why he committed such a terrible act against Tinasha. He was still the same person, but his own self felt formless and unmolded.

"I command the fourth lake that was born. I am the one who defines. I command you under the name Longing, which brought you into being. Your location shall be twilight."

When he thought of the past, the first thing to come to mind was always her as a lovely young girl. In his memories, she was always blushing shyly. He had to protect her. She existed solely for him to protect.

"I command the final lake that was born. I am the one who defines. I command you under the name Hatred, which brought you into being. Your location shall be midnight."

Why had he lived for four hundred years? Why hadn't he died?

He didn’t know what he’d been thinking, putting himself into a magical sleep, but suspected it was so he could see her again.

Calm feelings surging within him, Lanak gazed down at his bride.

She was staring up at him and perhaps had been for some time.

There was a challenging glint in her dark eyes.

For some reason, that look made him flinch and recoil.

A sneaking feeling began to grow.

He stopped chanting.

A smile flickered across Tinasha’s face.

Lanak had never seen her make such an expression before.

Cuscull mages were abuzz with speculation as they watched the king’s bride suddenly stand up.

She brushed Lanak’s hand from her shoulder. He stumbled back several steps.

“Aeti, what are you…?”

The witch offered no answer. With a radiant smile, she faced him. More specifically, she turned toward the spell configuration he had created. With elegance, she extended a hand.

“Come.”

In answer to her command, the enormous configuration rushed to her.

The winds swirling around the ruins dispersed at this new interference.

Struck dumb, Lanak tried to stop the spell from going to her. He stared at the woman, thoroughly stunned.

“What are you doing?” Lanak asked. “This is—”

With a snort, the woman took in her surroundings

She gazed at the ruins of her fallen country with an overwhelming sense of wistful longing.

“It’s been so long…”

Her clear, lovely voice resounded far and wide.

She beamed at Lanak with a smile so beautiful that anyone in the world would’ve found themselves entranced by it.

“I’ve been searching for you forever… I really wanted to see you; I missed you. When we met again, I was so happy I could cry.”

In her eyes shone honest admiration for Lanak. It was a look not unlike that of love, though not quite the same.

Under her slender fingers, Lanak’s complex spell array wavered even more, jerking toward her. From her petal-shaped lips fell a whisper imbued with trembling ardor. “I really needed you… What I truly wanted…was the names of the lakes that only you, as the caster, knew.”

The woman’s smile twisted, and suddenly she was someone new.

In an instant, she changed from adorable young girl to powerful victor. Her grin was bewitching and cruel.

Lanak felt the abyss within her seize hold of him.

“I can finally set free the bound souls of the people you killed four hundred years ago—all those poor people who melted into the magical lakes.”

A proclamation from the distant past echoed. It spoke of a wish that had survived the passing centuries.

Finally, signs of dawning comprehension showed on Lanak’s face.

The witch extended her pale ivory arms wide.

“Come to me.”

The spell was drawn into her arms. Lanak desperately tried to stop it, but it was wrested from his hands and quickly fell under the woman’s sway.

With a sweet, beatific smile, she poured magic into the complex array, resetting it.

At an incredible speed, the witch transmuted the spell from one that would control the magical lakes…into one that would dismantle and divert them.

“Aeti, you…”

Lanak had lost all thought. All that remained in his mind were his few feeble memories.

She should have been the person he needed to protect.

Once she was a weak, lonely little girl, but now she was a feared and hated witch. She couldn’t survive without him. He had to ensure her safety.

Letting her overpower him…was unacceptable.

Lanak was waking from his long sleep. Fury and hatred blotted out the dreaming persona. Arising to replace it were the emotions that had been previously frozen dead within him, feelings from a time long since destroyed.

The violent, indelible passion that had led Lanak to slice open a poor girl was now surging back to life.

“Aeti… Would you betray me again?”

“Betray you? The reason I am still alive today was all for this moment,” the witch declared.

“Now, let the atonement begin!”

Her roaring declaration was a link between the past and the present.

Furious heat boiled in Lanak. Four hundred years later, this woman was *still* getting in his way.

“Why, you… I won’t allow it!”

Furious, Lanak prepared a spell to attack, but Tinasha effortlessly lifted a hand and diffused it. Furious at the counter maneuver, Lanak barked, “Kill this woman! …No, neutralize her! Cut off her limbs for all I care!”

Tinasha watched Lanak’s pale face contort with hideous fury as she leaped back a few paces. With a nasty sneer, she cooed, “It’s been a long time since I’ve seen you look like that. You’re the spitting image of the man you used to be. Does that mean you’ve finally woken up?”

“You’ve got a big mouth for a little brat!” Lanak spat acidly.

Renart and Pamyra hurried to Tinasha’s side. She glanced at them, then snapped her fingers. Pieces of obsidian appeared, floating in the air all around her. With the same motion, Tinasha pointed at the captured audience still standing at the base of the stairway. Forty of the dark, glassy stones winked out and reappeared in a pattern around the group, forming a barrier.

“Ahhh… I knew it!” Pamyra cried in consternation, and Renart sighed. The stones were infused with spells originally meant to form a protective barrier around Tinasha. Despite her power, she still required concentration for the incantation to divert the five magical lakes. That was why she needed a barrier that could protect Oscar and the others during the intervening time. Both Pamyra and Renart knew, however, that Tinasha was protecting the captives at the expense of guarding herself.

“Go!” the witch hissed to her two loyal attendants.

Fending off the hail of offensive spells that came barreling downward from every direction, Pamyra and Renart both turned down the command.

“No!”

“I refuse.”

Lanak’s huge spell had already activated, synchronizing the magical lakes. If Tinasha relinquished now, a storm of magical power worse than when Tuldarr was destroyed would carve its way across the land. The only hope was to reset the spell and divert the magical lakes. Tinasha was the only person capable of such a feat.

Guarding their lady, Pamyra and Renart retaliated against Lanak’s closest followers. The man himself fell back behind a row of his supporters and was still clearly enraged. Evidently, he didn’t want to expend his own magic.

Without an incantation, Renart summoned up a blade of wind. It mowed down two mages still in the middle of chanting. Pamyra was about to give pursuit when she sensed something and threw up a defensive shield at Renart’s side. Black flames battered against it.

“Ngh! Damn you…!”

The attack was more intense than she’d anticipated, forcing Pamyra to devote all her strength into fortifying the shield. She stumbled a few steps back and glared at the source of the strike.

It was the mad mage Bardalos, standing there with a look of unmitigated glee. “So you really did betray us! How hilarious!”

Bardalos loosed another wave of dark fire. This time, he aimed for the witch, who was still deep in the middle of her diversion spell. Renart hurried to block it, but a second spell came hurtling toward him and rooted his feet to the ground.

“Lady Tinasha!” Pamyra screamed, afraid that Bardalos’s attack would reach the witch.

Much to her relief and surprise, however, the shadowy tongues of fire never knew the taste of Tinasha’s flesh.

Looking slightly put out, Tinasha glared up at the man who had leaped to protect her.

“You really need to learn how to ask me for help,” he drawled.

Before Tinasha stood the one man who could kill her.

As Oscar was eyeing the situation at the base of the steps, Als came running up to him, hacking his way through Cuscull soldiers along the way. Doan and the other mages intermittently stepped outside the barrier to return fire against the enemy mages. Nark swelled in size and engaged in an aerial battle against five demons.

Of those fifty who'd been kidnapped via teleport, close to half managed to grasp the situation and spring into action. Some even dared to push past Tinasha's shield. They charged forward to protect the witch, recognizing that she was key to their survival. Others climbed the stone steps in an attempt to reach the throne.

As things quickly devolved into a free-for-all, Bardalos hurled a spear of light toward the man who'd stood himself in front of the witch. The magic pole arm merely struck Oscar's barrier and shattered.

"What?!" Bardalos exclaimed in shock. Oscar cast a knowing glance back at Tinasha. She returned the look while still working on Lanak's spell.

…He's here. He actually came.

Just knowing that was enough to fill her with a curious feeling of reassurance. The back of her throat grew hot.

"What do you want me to do?" Oscar asked, and Tinasha looked down and ran some calculations. It was going to take her thirty minutes to finish reciting the spell. She wasn't sure she'd be able to last that long amid the current chaotic situation. Even if she did, there was still a chance of catastrophic damage.

Tinasha looked back up at Oscar. Her dark eyes glowed with a light that Oscar knew very well.

"Give me as much time as you can."

"As you wish," he replied immediately. Tinasha nodded.

Then she began the new incantation that would overturn everything. Positioning himself in front of Tinasha, Oscar prepared to square off against Bardalos. The mad mage grinned with delight. "The swordsman of Akashia, eh? Heard a lot of legends. Wonder how much is true."

"Hmm? I don't care," Oscar spat out and advanced on Bardalos. The other man had been expecting that, however, and aimed a sickle of flames at Oscar's feet.

Dodging it would risk the spell hitting Tinasha behind him. Instead, Oscar brought down his sword and smashed Bardalos's magic apart. Akashia scattered the flames, leaving only black scorch marks on the stone.

Bardalos licked his lips. "You're pretty good with that. I thought you were just a foolish swordsman who'd let the barrier do all the work."

"I don't want to make any trouble for her—that's all," Oscar shot back.

The defensive barrier was linked to Tinasha. Oscar wasn't sure what was going to happen as she completed her spell. As such, he wanted to make certain that he didn't drain her power unnecessarily.

Bardalos sneered as the king again fended off the magic rushing at him with a single sweep of Akashia. "It'll be interesting to see how long you can

keep that up. You might even die without ever moving a single step from where you stand. That sure would be a shame. My first audience with the Mage Killer is certainly turning out to be rather disappointing."

"Sorry to say, but my merciless teacher gave me one hell of a training regimen. I promise you won't be disappointed, though I can't promise your survival."

"Bold words. I hope you have the strength to back them up," Bardalos sneered. With an arcane motion, he summoned up some two dozen fireballs that floated in midair.

A swordsman who kept his distance would soon find himself battered by a volley of ranged attacks. While this upstart king possessed a legendarily dangerous weapon, Bardalos believed there was nothing to fear so long as the sword never touched him. In his mind, the battle was already over—and he had won.

"Go on—burn to cinders," he cried with glee, commanding a flurry of fireballs down on Oscar. With one eye on his burning storm, Bardalos lifted his right hand to cast his next spell. He believed wholeheartedly in his own dominance, but then his eyes widened.

"Die."

Unbelievable speed, unbelievable distance. A drawn sword glittered before his eyes like a polished mirror.

All of Bardalos's thoughts ended there. In one motion, Oscar had cleaved through the foul man's magical defenses and his neck.

Many of the Cuscull mages began to lose their will to fight after seeing their chief mage meet his end in a flashy spray of blood.

Behind them, Lanak continued to rage. "Summon more demons! Kill them!" he howled.

At this royal decree, the mages on the outermost stone steps began summoning incantations. A mage near the throne began the same sort of spell, but Als came leaping up and quickly struck that person down. With Pamyra and Renart in the fray as well, Lanak's forces were quickly losing control of the platform with the throne.

To compensate, more and more of the mages who'd been in the outer ring teleported into the center. The occasional demon came with them, too.

"That can't be true! There's no way Lady Aeterna would betray us!" rose Tris's voice above the melee.

She couldn't bring herself to attack Tinasha, but neither could she defend her like Pamyra and Renart. Unsure and unwilling, she simply stood stock-still in disbelief. As other Cuscull mages teleported to the center of the fight, she was pushed to the back.

Tris's childhood dreams were dying before her very eyes, and it seemed that everyone was content not to help. Only power and blood mattered on the battlefield. Finally, Tris tore her tear-filled eyes away from the spectacle and ran off. Tears trailing behind her, she vanished into the wilderness. A

Cuscull mage who noticed the fleeing girl raised a hand to send a fire arrow after her.

Meredina's sword bit into the caster and stopped the spell before it began, however. Protected by a barrier made by Doan and Kav, she slashed her way through the outer stone steps. As she pressed on through the crowd, someone threw a ball of light in her face.

"What in the—?!"

Closing one eye reflexively, Meredina slashed blindly with her blade in an attempt to hack through the spell. Before her sword made contact, the incoming magical attack simply bounced off the protections that her friends had placed on her.

"Stop acting like His Majesty. You can't cut through magic with a normal sword," Doan reminded her, appalled, as he hurled a small lightning bolt at some Cuscull mages.

"Wasn't it better than doing nothing?" she snapped back.

Meredina came in from the left. With a practiced motion, she severed the arm of a mage that'd been attempting to protect himself with lightning. He collapsed to the ground with a shriek, and Meredina continued to move forward.

From behind, Doan calmly cautioned, "You're going a little too fast. Slow down."

Meredina shrugged and took two steps back, only to meet the sharp claws of a lizardman's swipe. A terrible, metallic screech rang out in the arena. She exchanged three blows with the creature before plunging her sword into its scaly chest.

Another lizard tried to grab her sword, but a Cezar general cut it down from behind. Meredina pulled the blade out and nodded at the general, who gave a casual wave back.

Sword in hand in the middle of the battlefield, Reust looked at the dauntless Farsasian crew and bit back a sigh.

He had a habit of losing track of time during fights. One moment would pass in a flash, and the next seemed to lag. It was like wandering endlessly through a fog with no clear exit.

As he crossed swords with a wave of advancing demons, he looked up at the witch on the stone platform. Even at this distance, her white dress made her easy to spot.

She seemed just as beautiful as ever, even as she chanted her spell. Reust was so caught up in looking at the lovely lines of her face that a small magic spear grazed his shoulder. When he looked to see who had thrown it, he saw a very young mage—a boy, really—scowling at him with fear and hatred.

"Die! Rot in hell, you monster!"

The bitter cry was unmistakably meant for Reust alone.

Tayiri had built up this hatred over the centuries. Seeing it right before him in the flesh took his breath away.

The boy sketched a rough spell array, then hurled it at Reust. It became a fireball as it arced through the air, leaving a trail of flames in its wake. Faced with a literal burning manifestation of anger, Reust choked out, “Is this the result of Tayiri’s sin…?”

It was indeed a terrible thing to deny others the very right to live as human beings.

Both sides had been born with a twisted resentment of each other.

Had the day come for that to end? Was an end even possible?

Reust closed his eyes, ready to accept what came. Before the fireball could consume him, it was dispelled. Whirling around, Reust saw a mage of Farsas who waved him off casually.

“Save the deep thoughts for after this is over, Your Majesty. Right now, our priority is surviving.”

“…Got it,” Reust answered curtly, though not without sincerity. Tamping down the bitterness rooted in his heart, he strode up to the mage boy. As the little magic user hurried to prepare another spell, Reust drove an elbow into his stomach. He supported the buckling boy, gently laying him down on the ground. The time to think would come later; for now, Reust knew he had to keep his head up high.

He raised his sword, ready to engage his next opponent.

A winged demon swooped down upon the witch with its claws outstretched. A burst of fire rose to meet it, however. Hurling attacks as they dashed up the stone stairs, Sylvia and Kumu finally reached the top and rushed over to Tinasha. Although she was in the middle of her long incantation, she acknowledged the pair with a smile.

Overcome with joy that Tinasha was still her old self, Sylvia nearly broke down in tears. “We’ll protect you. I promise!” She then began to chant a spell. *“O midday star, o nighttime flower. O thing that cannot be seen, breathe. Spiral up.”*

It was a rather elementary spell that induced sleep. However, in the hands of Sylvia, a court mage, the effect was strengthened to a degree one could only describe as bizarre. Ordinarily, the spell wouldn’t have affected other magic users very much. That was why the Cuscull mages chose to ignore it. This complacency proved to be their undoing as one by one they began to stumble and fall.

Next to her, Kumu took point in front of the witch so that Oscar could enter the fray. He put up a defensive barrier and listened to the witch’s incantation more closely.

“…A double incantation?!” Kumu yelped in surprise before he could stop himself, and all the mages around him turned their heads. The shock on their faces meant that they’d realized it, too.

A double incantation was an old, high-grade magical art that had died with Tuldarr.

According to the records, by using one incantation to create two spell configurations, two types of magic could be utilized at the same time. Doing

so unfortunately required more than just the power to cast each spell individually, making double incantations one of the most advanced magical arts ever devised. Tinasha's usage of this now meant that she was preparing to cast something besides her spell to divert the power of the magical lakes.

"And not only that…"

When Kumu realized what the second spell was, he gasped and fell silent. Pamyra had come up to him, and she finished his sentence. "This is… from Tuldarr's coronation ceremony…"

As if in response, the witch stretched out her right hand, palm facing downward.

A white glowing circle of light appeared around her. It rapidly expanded, stopping at the edge of the stone stairs. Lanak saw it from his position in the air above the fray, and he seethed with fury.

"Aeti! How much further will you go to mock me?!"

Tinasha offered no answer.

Dozens of white, glowing spell patterns rose up within the great ring. A huge light erupted from what would've been the one o'clock position had the spell array been a clock. Soon after, a similar luminous burst appeared at the two o'clock position, then three, and so on.

Powerful lights glowed in sequence until finally the twelve o'clock position blazed to life.

Perched from a high vantage point, Doan beheld the incredible display and muttered, "Could that be Tuldarr's…? Wait, twelve? All of them? She can't be serious."

Brandishing Akashia against multiple demons, Oscar slashed apart the torso of a lizardman who leaped at him. He snapped the weapon to shake blood from its blade, then looked over his shoulder.

He caught sight of the witch and grinned. "Has enough time passed yet? What are you gonna show us?"

Combatants on both sides chanced glances at the witch. An unbelievable amount of magic had gathered around her.

This was when she showed what a witch was truly made of. Everyone could feel in their bones that this was going to be a turning point in history.

Tinasha paused in her chanting and began to issue some sort of decree. Her voice rang out sonorously across the battlefield.

"Appear, spirits bound to Tuldarr by an ancient contract! My name is Tinasha As Meyer Ur Aeterna Tuldarr! I am your regent, and by this proclamation, you are defined… Come to me!"

All was lost to a blinding explosion of white.

A violent torrent of power came rolling in. Sandy winds buffeted those still standing.

The air changed. A stream of alternating hot and cold winds rushed in.

When the dust settled—Tuldarr's twelve hereditary spirits had appeared.

The beings known as the spirits of Tuldarr were legends spoken of in magical history. They were high-ranking demons that the first king of

Tuldarr had summoned and bound to the nation. At the time a new regent was crowned, one to three of them—based on the regent's magical abilities—would be selected and put to use.

History had taught many that it was impossible for any ruler of Tuldarr to control multiple high-ranking demons at once.

Tinasha's calling of all twelve seemed akin to lunacy, yet it was happening before every nonbeliever's eyes.

The high-ranking demons stood above the circle. One of them, a man with vermilion hair, said in a leisurely tone, "It's been so, so long since I last made myself known."

"Oh? I hadn't gotten enough sleep yet…," another complained.

"Hey, the country's in ruins."

"Well, anything humans create is fragile."

As the demons started to chat with one other, the humans all around gaped in shock. Some of the demons looked elderly, while others appeared as young men and women. One or two even resembled children. Whatever their appearance, it was clear that none were truly human. Their deep crimson hair and aloof, intimidating airs betrayed their true natures.

If left to their own devices, they seemed liable to chat among themselves forever, but a word from the witch shut them up.

"I order…"

At that, all the spirits knelt down. The old, white-haired one at the twelve o'clock position spoke for its peers with a dignified tone. "Our master. What is your order?"

"Annihilate the enemies. Leave those who do not show hostility unharmed. Avoid killing if you can."

"We understand."

Their directive clear, the twelve rose to their feet. A few of them had their eyes closed, yet others were openly smirking. The vermilion-haired spirit appeared to be familiar with Tinasha and teased, "You're all grown up but still such a naive little girl."

"Just do it," Tinasha commanded, waving a hand at them dismissively, and they scattered.

Instantly, the nearly one hundred demons the Cuscull mages had summoned all vanished.

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The appearance of the spirits was enough to sap any remaining desire to fight from Lanak's forces. Terrified of such a supernatural power, they either surrendered or fled the scene.

Now free of opposition, the witch resumed her first incantation. All anyone could do was watch the huge, intricately woven spell as it grew to exceed all human limitations.

Just like that, the battle was over. Lanak turned tail and ran through the ruins of the country he'd destroyed, panting all the while.

Gradually, the tumult grew distant. He tried to teleport away but found concentration extremely difficult. Whether it was due to exhaustion from the spell he'd created using Tinasha as a catalyst or more deep-set damage from his long stasis was anyone's guess. Either way, his body's magic was in tatters.

Lanak growled, the taste of fresh blood in his mouth. "Aeti… Aeterna…"

All he did was repeat her name. It was impossible to say now whether the word was spiked with hatred or something else entirely.

Over and over, Lanak repeated the name, as if calling it was the only thing still anchoring him in this world. A cloud of sand rolled by and engulfed the pale man.

Suddenly, Lanak's surroundings grew terribly dark. He looked up to see a red dragon circling overhead. After catching sight of Lanak, the great beast started into a descent. A man leaped off its back.

Amid the grit, Lanak spied a double-edged sword that'd been polished to a mirrorlike sheen. He knew it well; the weapon was the only one of its kind in all the land.

The man who'd leaped from the dragon was blocking Lanak's way. Doing his best to remain calm, Lanak called, "Hello. We meet again, I see. I believe the outcome of our little skirmish is already decided, so what are you here for?"

"Oh, nothing. I just had something to ask you," Oscar replied, readjusting his grip on Akashia's hilt. His handsome features were emotionless, but an angry fire burned in his eyes.

"What could you possibly want from me? If there's anything you want to know, you should ask Aeterna, not me."

Much like what had transpired in today's battle, Lanak was sure that Tinasha understood more than he ever had. He was the only one who'd been clueless.

"Aeti knows everything. Take pity on me. We were both potential rulers of Tuldarr, but I wasn't powerful enough."

Lanak wished she'd stayed as the little girl he only had to protect. She was supposed to marry him; that was her role. Unfortunately, her talent and diligence had brought about a betrayal. If she'd only been weak, none of this would have happened.

"It is because of her that Tuldarr came to ruin. She's the reason I…"

"You abused her trust," Oscar spat coldly. His words concealed a frightening threat, and Lanak fell silent.

While the pale man was unsure of many things, he had a powerful hunch that he was going to die here.

Lanak's long life, a journey bereft of joy, was coming to its end.

With indifference in his tone, Oscar asked another question. "What did you feel when you cut her open?"

"…Ha."

Lanak's face twisted into something resembling a smile. He only remembered that it was a lurid, ghastly sight.

He could hear her voice as she screamed and begged him to save her. Her blood and entrails had gushed up from her little body. The nauseating stench tickled his nose even now.

Lanak could still feel her innards in his hands, and he glanced down at his empty palms.

Compassion, jealousy, denial, longing, and hatred.

The names he gave to the lakes were the only feelings Lanak had ever felt toward her.

She was the woman who controlled his life and whose life he should have controlled. In truth, he had loved her. She had reached out to him with such innocence, and he'd only wanted to cherish her.

He simply never had the power to make that happen.

That was why…he'd wanted his power to exceed hers.

"Lanak, stay with me. Don't leave me alone."

"It's all right, Aeti. I'll protect you."

Someday, he'd awaken from that fleeting dream. The illusory vision of the past that had so consumed Lanak for over four hundred years was now finally giving way to reality.

…He was sure that she would never look back at him again.

Lanak had been the one who'd perished that terrible night at the altar. In the throes of his demise, he'd ripped the purest part from his beloved.

The pallid man looked up with a crooked smile on his lips. "I wasn't thinking about anything. She was just a tool."

Perhaps that's why he didn't need to say her name anymore.

Lanak closed his eyes, shutting out all feeling.

Akashia bore down on him, and in his final moments, Lanak whispered her name one last time.

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A young man selling firewood in the landlocked nation of Cezar was suddenly struck by an odd sensation. Curious, he looked to the eastern sky.

Legend had it that an evil god and his worshippers had built a village hidden in the forest along the eastern border. However, if the old tales were to be believed, magic fell from the sky and destroyed the village four hundred years ago.

After that, the place where the secluded settlement once stood became known as something called a magical lake.

As the boy stared toward the horizon, he saw something shine brightly in the sky and his eyes widened.

At first, he thought it was just his imagination, but the very next moment, white lights began to fountain up from the forest. Rather leisurely, they began to make their way up toward the sky.

"…What in the world?"

The sight was a wonder, a mystery, but beautiful to behold.

Such a spectacular phenomenon was enough to inspire faith in forsaken gods.

A warm, soft breeze swept across the entire region, though there was no wind.

The luminous motes continued their climbing until they diffused into the sky, gradually diminishing in number and growing paler. The boy stood rooted to the ground, entranced by the sight of it all.

At long last, all the floating, meandering globes dissolved into the clouds and disappeared.

Nothing was left.

For a long time after, the young man gazed dumbly up at the heavens.

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The titanic spell configuration, set aloft from the witch's grasp, finished diverting the energy of the magical lakes and dissolved into the open air above.

Now that her long incantation was finally over, Tinasha stared out at the former battlefield with placid eyes.

The stench of blood and charred flesh clung heavily to the breeze. Burnt and motionless bodies lay facedown. Tinasha carefully partook of the brutal sight. Cries of agony and death still lingered in her ears, or perhaps the sound was in her mind.

…It would be very easy to cry.

Tinasha didn't want to, though. Allowing her emotions to rise risked them overflowing and her losing control. No matter what she felt, Tinasha knew it didn't change the fact that every death today was her fault—her burden.

Those who survived were staring at Tinasha with a strange elation. It was the deep sort of emotion shared by comrades who fought side by side for a united cause.

There were just as many—particularly those still cowering inside the barrier Tinasha had formed with the pieces of obsidian—who eyed her fearfully, however. Pamyra and Renart moved to shield their lady from those hostile gazes.

They were covered in wounds from head to toe, and Tinasha cast them a look as if to say, *It's all right now*.

Her dark eyes landed on Nark, who'd come back. The man who alighted from the red dragon spotted her and wasted no time in rushing to her side. Tinasha awaited him in silence.

A general from Gandona stopped Oscar before he could reach the witch. "As the bearer of Akashia, I trust you know what needs to be done," he said.

A nervous ripple ran through the crowd. All present knew that Oscar was tasked with slaying the witch.

Oscar nodded tightly, then strode to Tinasha. He paused before Pamyra and Renart, who were teeming with animosity. Before either could conjure up some manner of defense for their lady, the witch talked them down.

“Thank you, both of you. Let him through.”

While they were reluctant, they heeded their lady’s order and stepped aside.

Oscar passed between the two and at last came to stand before the witch.

Tinasha was about to call Oscar’s name but held the word back.

She knew he had been crowned king of Farsas. That made it all the more improper for people to know he had any connection to a witch. He was someone who would walk the path of righteousness and go down in history as a wise ruler.

Knowing this, Tinasha thought it best that she fade away and become nothing more than his stepping-stone. She prayed that he would find happiness in the future to come.

“Please…,” she said, the quiet plea unconsciously spilling from her. Realizing she’d spoken aloud, Tinasha pressed her lips shut tight.

She didn’t know what she’d planned to say. All that she’d kept so repressed had somehow slipped out a little. The lingering heat in her throat felt good. Tinasha thought it more than she deserved to die while enjoying that sensation.

The witch took a deep breath, then closed her eyes with a smile.

Diverting the magical lakes had exhausted her own power. It took everything she had just to stand upright.

If she was to meet the end today, she wanted to greet it on her feet, however—on her feet and dry-eyed.

The lakes were gone, Lanak was dead, and now she would die.

With her death, the ghosts of Tuldarr would disappear. After four hundred years, the fate they had altered would at last right its course.

Tinasha tilted her head up a little, almost as if she were expecting a kiss.

She waited for Akashia to run her through.

Oscar reached out toward her face. He brushed her smooth cheeks.

“Do you remember what I said when you broke Lucrezia’s spell?”

No answer came.

Very gently, he placed the blade of Akashia against her alabaster neck.

Tinasha’s body crumpled into Oscar’s arms.

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“Aeti, come here.”

She could hear a voice coming from very far away. It called her name, and she opened her eyes.

Tinasha was peering down a stone corridor that seemed to stretch on forever.

“Come to me, I’ve missed you.”

The voice was coming from somewhere behind her. It belonged to a boy who Tinasha missed terribly. She smiled. Tinasha recalled how she used to feel accustomed to solitude but still longed to cling to the warmth of someone's hands. Something not quite self-derision and not quite loneliness filled her heart.

"Aeti."

…Names defined people.

The name one was called became their self.

No matter how sweetly the voice in her memories called that name, Tinasha knew she would never turn back again. Aeti was a child who died a long, long time ago.

"Good-bye, Lanak."

Eyes focused on what was ahead, Tinasha began to walk forward.

The stone felt cool under her bare feet and told her nothing of the future that awaited her.

※

When she awoke, Tinasha realized she had no idea where she was.

In truth, she did know. It was more that she didn't understand. Her brain felt heavy and slow as she shook her head. Sitting upright in bed, she blinked blearily at the blue sky that could be glimpsed through the nearby window.

As she did, the door opened without a sound. Tinasha glanced over and saw a woman there. "Pamyra…?"

"Lady Tinasha, you're awake!" Pamyra cried, rushing over to kneel before the bed and take Tinasha's hand. She placed it against her own forehead, testing its warmth. "You've been asleep for over a week… I was very worried."

"I'm alive?"

"Of course you are!" Pamyra reproved her, but it still didn't feel real. Tinasha found she was wearing a nightgown, and she placed her feet on the floor. She tried to stand, but her body was too weak for her to stay up. She staggered, and Pamyra supported her.

"Thank you… So why am I in Farsas?"

"A lot of trouble has happened. But right now, you can't be up and about. Rest some more."

They were in Tinasha's bedroom in Farsas Castle. She had vacated these quarters, but it all looked the same as when she had left. Tinasha let Pamyra push her back down and sat on the edge of her bed.

She asked about the other mage. "Where's Renart?"

"The laboratory. Should I call him?"

"No, I just wanted to know he was safe," Tinasha said. She had a feeling that he was all right if Pamyra was, but it still gave her a sense of relief.

Tinasha took a breath, then looked up at Pamyra, who was checking the witch's pulse.

“Pamyra, I have a request…”

“What is it?”

“I want to go out of this room… Help me bathe and change my clothes.”

Her lady had barely recovered, so Pamyra pulled a face at this demand but nodded reluctantly.

Bathing proved a little tiring but also felt so wonderful that it swept aside what had built up inside her. It awakened her consciousness to a degree and cleared her thoughts. Back in her bedroom, Tinasha used magic to dry her hair and slipped into the long dress Pamyra brought her.

“It feels like my legs have weakened… I can’t walk very well… It might be easier to fly or teleport to get around.”

“You need to rest properly!” Pamyra practically shrieked, and someone outside the door took that as their cue to enter. The master of the castle walked in, looking sullen.

“Don’t go out if you aren’t at your best.”

“Oscar…”

He gave her the same warning as Pamyra, who bowed as she passed him and left the room.

Tinasha used magic to float over and land in front of him. She’d lost a bit of weight, and he picked her up like he would’ve done with a child. She touched his cheek as she asked, “Why am I alive?”

“Right off the bat, huh? If you’re feeling that good, I suppose you won’t mind if I grind my fist into your head for a moment.”

“That really hurts. Please don’t.”

Oscar brought her to the bed and sat her down on its edge. Then he dragged a nearby chair over and took a seat himself. “I never had any intention of killing you. And it feels gross that you wanted to make me do so.”

“I’m sorry.”

“Anyway, I’ve got tons more things I want to lecture you about. It’s likely to take half the day, so prepare yourself.”

“…I’m sorry,” Tinasha repeated, hanging her head like a child getting reprimanded. Oscar reached out and entwined his fingers in her long, silky black hair. As it was freshly dried, it was still a little warm.

The witch gazed into his eyes. They were a deep blue, and he stared at her just as seriously as he had before. Belying his harsh words was a look full of adoration that he lavished on her.

An indescribable sense of nostalgia welled up inside Tinasha when she saw that. “Can I touch you?” she asked.

“Do what you want.”

She floated up into the air and landed on her knees between his legs on the chair. Looping her arms around his neck, she pressed in close.

She had always thought that loneliness was just a natural thing for her.

When she finally found a way out, she plunged in headfirst, but then left it behind… The month and a half she had been away had felt like forever.

Everyone assumed Tinasha was dangerous, and she'd never thought it mattered. All she'd cared about was waiting for the right moment to arrive. Once it did, she believed she'd finally be able to pay back all the people she hadn't been able to save. To that end, she did her best not to pay any attention to what others thought, even if it wore away at her.

That was why Tinasha had held it all in—everything she wanted to cry out. No matter how the irritation and self-hatred tore at her, she never let it rise to the surface. Even when that sludge of emotion burned her up from the inside and she thought she would go mad, she still told herself she didn't have the right to express those feelings.

It was much the same as her childhood spent living all alone in a detached wing of a castle.

No one was with her. She blamed herself for everything. That had long since become her reality.

Acceptance should have settled in, yet Tinasha had always found herself strangely…lonely.

"You brought me back."

"Of course I did."

Tinasha buried her face in Oscar's shoulder. He was just as steady and warm as when she'd left.

Something began to rise up within her, tempting her to open up, but the witch didn't know what to say. There was just a comforting heat in her chest. It was so tranquil she felt ready to fall asleep in Oscar's arms.

Tinasha smiled, her wet eyelashes trembling. "A lot…happened. In the past and now."

"Mm-hmm."

"But I…"

After getting that far, Tinasha found herself unable to continue. She was positive that Oscar already knew anyway.

She breathed heavily, and as Oscar stroked her hair, he muttered, "Oh right… You're my fiancée now."

"Why?!"

"If I didn't say you were, I couldn't have brought you back with me. It was bad enough that someone told me to kill you, but your huge display of power earned you a whole list of suitors."

"You need to respect my opinion!"

"You're already here; just do your best for the remaining half of the year," Oscar instructed—as high-handed as ever.

Tinasha pulled back to heave a huge, exaggerated sigh, but she couldn't stop her face from breaking into a grin. She looked up at him from under her long lashes. "As you wish, then, O contract holder."

Oscar nodded solemnly, and she gave him an angelic smile. Then she hugged him again, whispering "Thank you" in his ear.

※

After the battle at the ruins, Oscar immediately sat down with all the high-ranking members of each country.

“All right, let’s jump right in and start our discussion of what to do post-battle. The plan is to cover everything we can, including how to handle *that*,” declared the king of Farsas, an irrepressible air of authority belying his calm demeanor. The representatives of the other countries, Reust included, picked up on the inherent threat in his words and gulped.

The conference, held at Tayiri Castle soon after the group returned, was on a timer. The witch, depleted of her power and cuffed with the Farsas sealing bracelet, was put to sleep in a separate room. If they didn’t decide how to handle her before she woke up, none could say how things would play out.

Everyone understood that going into this discussion, though things began under a veneer of calm. Focusing mainly on Reust, the group made arrangements regarding compensation for the troops Tayiri sent out and the Cuscull mages taken as prisoners of war. When talk finally turned to what to do with the witch, a general of Cezar—one of the Four Great Nations—readily volunteered as the first to speak.

“About the witch… Whatever her reasons, she sided with Cuscull and she’s incredibly guilty. There can be no better time to end the threat she poses than this very moment… There would be one less threat to our land.”

Among the five witches who were the symbols of their era, Tinasha was undoubtedly the strongest.

The battle with Lanak had laid bare the extent of her power. On top of that, she now controlled twelve high-ranking demons. She was not someone they could just ignore.

The representative of Gandona, another Great Nation, agreed. A silence of implicit consensus fell over the room.

Oscar surveyed the group, then rested his folded hands on the table. “There’s still room for discussion as to whether she’s guilty. We were able to confirm that all the people who vanished from cities and towns in Farsas were restored unharmed before the battle.”

“…What?”

“It seems likely that she used a kind of invisibility magic to merely hide them. I’d like to know if this is the same for those cities that were ‘attacked’ in other countries,” Oscar said, though he knew what the answer would be. Confusion broke out among those at the table.

The only one present who was not shocked to hear that was Reust. He lifted a feeble hand to reply, “Tayiri has also confirmed what happened in our cities. It’s true—there were no victims wherever she was involved. I can’t say the same for the very first town that burned to the ground, but… it’s possible that she learned from that incident and intervened within Cuscull to reduce future damage.”

Tinasha had volunteered for a dirty job to make sure no one else came to harm.

Those gathered in that very conference had seen with their own eyes what Tinasha's true goal had been.

The queen of a ruined country. The witch who lived for those that had been lost.

Oscar and the others carried the weight of their respective countries on their backs. They all felt deeply moved despite themselves by the awfully clumsy, sincere beauty of that woman.

The third prince of Gandona piped up nervously. "She's the successor to Tuldarr, isn't she? Doesn't that mean she has magical knowledge that's been otherwise lost for centuries? I think it overly hasty to execute her while she's unconscious…"

"But we won't be able to stop her once she's awake. She's a witch," snapped the general of Cezar warningly, a sour look on his face.

Oscar cut in quickly. "If she's with me, I can stop her. She's very reasonable as far as witches go. And I'm sure I don't need to explain why Farsas is the most suited to take charge of her."

"…Akashia."

The royal sword of Farsas was the one weapon that could kill a witch.

Right now, a sealing bracelet, made of the same material as Akashia, held Tinasha in check. At present, she wasn't a threat. The king of Farsas was the only person in the land with items that could so disarm a witch at his disposal.

Rather hesitantly, the Gandona general protested, "But wouldn't that mean that Farsas has a monopoly on the witch's power? If she's as reasonable as you say, I should think many countries would want to borrow her power."

"If all you had to do was ask her for a favor, she wouldn't have been living in a tower. As long as we don't do anything, she's completely harmless—just floating around reading books all day long. But make one wrong move and she'll reject you. The envoy from Cuscull made that mistake, and she turned down his invitation."

"She refused an envoy from Cuscull? How do you know about that?"

"Because I was originally the one who brought her down from her tower," Oscar admitted. Reust's eyes widened.

The others reacted in much the same way. Everyone looked like they wanted to say something but couldn't find the words. Slowly, Oscar looked at each member of the conference in turn. Sitting up perfectly straight in his chair, he said, "I'm sure she had her reasons for her part in the Cuscull incident, but ultimately the fault is with my negligence. I apologize for that and vow that nothing like this will happen again."

His low, resonant voice sent a ripple through the council. The representatives from the other major nations exchanged glances, unsure of how to respond to what the king of Farsas said. Though he was making his own position highly precarious, Oscar went on matter-of-factly, "Bearing

that in mind, I intend to answer your concerns to your complete satisfaction. Ask away."

Oscar ceded some ground in the debate, but his unwavering intent was still clear in his attitude. Doubt plain in his tone, the Cezar general inquired, "I'm sorry, but why are you going to so much trouble for her?"

The witch was a living cataclysm, an abominable oddity. Why was he, a royal, taking steps to protect her? It was a perfectly natural question, and Oscar smirked. "That's easy. It's because she's going to be my wife."

"What…?"

Palpable waves of varying degrees of shock ran through the room as everyone's heads swiveled to look at Oscar.

The young king of Farsas just gave the largely uncomprehending group a light smile. He finally picked up the cup of tea in front of him and took a sip.

By the end of the day, the decision was made; the witch would stay with Oscar.

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"I just know he did something rash so he could take me in… Hmm, is it really all right…?" Tinasha fretted between mouthfuls of soup in bed.

"I wouldn't worry about that part. He was kind enough to allow Renart and me to stay with you, too," Pamyra said with a tight smile.

It certainly hadn't been easy—Oscar had been left with no choice but to force his opinion on certain points—but he'd succeeded in convincing the other representatives to withdraw their concerns about the witch. Upon hearing that, Tinasha decided she needed to be on her best behavior whenever she left Farsas.

Pamyra went on to explain one other thing she knew her lady was wondering. "Tayiri initially held the Cuscull mages who surrendered, but later they were allowed to return home. Prince Reust has declared that Tayiri recognizes Cuscull as a self-governing, inviolate dominion for mages."

"…Wow, that's unexpected."

"It appears he's taken your sermons to heart. Inspired by recent events, a number of Tayiri people have begun speaking out about the persecution of mages. Several members of the Tayiri elite had children born with magic who were killed by the state, after all."

"Ah… I see now. That would help things along."

The death toll for Tayiri ultimately comprised those killed in that first village that was razed and the soldiers who fell during the battle on the Asdra Plains. Both were tragedies but may have marked the end to something even bigger. Only the passage of time would say for sure.

Tinasha felt faintly for her part in the recent changes. Returning her empty bowl to Pamyra, she broached the subject of one final person she was worried about. "Do you know what happened to Tris?"

"I don't know where she is now, but…I'm sure she's doing fine wherever she is. I just know it."

“Oh…”

It seemed Tinasha hadn’t succeeded in saving everyone.

For all her power, such a feat was impossible. Just like turning back time or returning the dead to life, there were some things she could do nothing about.

Even if she had the ability, it was unfeasible to expect a single person to help everyone. That was why Tinasha had decided a long time ago that she wouldn’t get involved. Her decision to exist as a witch was a choice to live for those who had passed, not the living.

Even so, she couldn’t help but mourn. Whether that amounted to hypocrisy or self-gratification, she was still free to do it.

Tinasha gazed up at the canopy of her bed and sighed.

Everything she had been working toward was over now. There was nothing left she wanted to do. If she died the next day, she wouldn’t have found it objectionable… Her contract with Oscar still remained, however.

Tinasha decided to live for just a while longer. She would live for the man who hadn’t killed her.

When she thought about it that way…she did feel a little glad to be alive.

7. Teatime

“All the magical lakes really cleared away completely. It’s amazing.”

“That was my goal from the start.”

One week after Tinasha awoke, King Oscar had handled almost all the remaining post-battle cleanup, and Farsas Castle was completely back to normal. Amid that backdrop, two witches were having tea in the castle lounge.

It was a glorious afternoon, and Sylvia whispered to Kav at the next table over, “It doesn’t seem strange to me at all anymore to see Miss Tinasha and Miss Lucrezia here at the castle… I suppose my senses are dulled…”

“Mine too,” he replied.

Two of the mainland’s five witches came and went freely from the castle of one specific country. This was probably the first time such a thing had ever become commonplace during the Age of Witches. By and large, they were the personifications of power and fear. The extent of said power had recently been laid bare for all to behold. The sight of two witches calmly sipping tea was oddly humanizing, however.

Teacup in hand, Lucrezia pointed at Tinasha. “I heard you inherited the spirits, too? You were really prepared for the worst.”

“Don’t bring that up,” Tinasha said with an annoyed scowl.

Behind her, Pamyra piped up wonderingly. “Why didn’t you inherit them before this?”

It was a perfectly natural question. The witch who should have become queen of Tuldarr grimaced. “I’ve never felt a need for more might than I already have, and the spirits are the symbol of the Tuldarr throne. Wouldn’t it be ridiculous to have a ruler but no country? Country and ruler are concepts that exist to protect the lives of the people, after all.”

Tinasha smiled, as if to say that, even now, she had no use for the twelve.

What she said made perfect sense, and Pamyra simply nodded. Sylvia, Doan, Kav, Renart, and the other mages all looked serious.

…Even so, she’s a queen without a throne, thought Pamyra.

The witch brushed it off as something she'd done for a personal reason, but she had chosen to exist for four hundred years in order to free the souls of Tuldarr's dead. If anyone was fit to rule, it was her.

Lucrezia rested her chin in her hands and stared at the witch. Then her eyes narrowed fondly. Before Tinasha realized it, the other witch was wearing a bright, perfect grin. "By the way, I brought a new type of pastry for you to try."

"Really? What kind?" Tinasha asked, her eyes sparkling, and Lucrezia conjured up a plate piled high with confections.

"Here you go. Be my taste testers, everyone."

The pastry was cut into the shape of a flower and dusted with sugar on top, but breaking it open revealed three layers in different colors. Tinasha tasted one first, followed by Sylvia, Pamyra, and then the men. Perhaps Renart didn't have much of a sweet tooth, because he hesitated. After a moment, he gave in and partook, however. His eyes widened. "This is good."

Looking delighted, Sylvia took a second one. "They're absolutely delicious! I'm in heaven!"

"Mm, thank you. Have as many as you like."

Most of the group was enraptured, but Tinasha looked unsure after eating one. She appeared quite dubious, and Lucrezia cocked her head.

"What is it?" she asked. "Do you not like the taste?"

"No, the taste is fine. Did you put magic in these?"

"Mm-hmm. Since I made them with three types of batter, I used magic to adjust the baking time."

"I see," Tinasha said. With her doubts dispelled, she took another pastry. As she savored the taste of it, she sipped at the tea she'd made. Lucrezia's baking was always exceptional. Tinasha had been enchanted by the taste of her friend's handiwork ever since she first became a witch. Lucrezia looked on with a smile as Tinasha grinned happily to herself.

By the time Tinasha took a third one, the other mages had already eaten through most of the plate. She took a fourth and twirled it around as she asked innocently, "Is the magic you used new? You said we're taste testing them."

"Nope, I put an aphrodisiac in them," Lucrezia admitted, grinning with glee.

Everyone froze. Doan put down his half-eaten pastry. Kav choked on a mouthful of tea.

This was unbelievable. A muscle in Tinasha's face twitched. "What exactly are you playing at here…?"

"I buried it layers deep in the spell so you wouldn't notice, but you still picked up on the magic. I suppose it was naive of me to hope you wouldn't sniff it out."

"I'm asking you to tell me *why* you did that!"

Magic began to crackle and spark in the air over the table. The mages all paled at the sight.

“Maybe we should call His Majesty…,” Kav muttered to his peers in a low voice.

“Oh, possibly.”

None liked the idea of explaining how a castle fell to indecency.

Just as Kav tried to creep out of the room unnoticed, Lucrezia blocked his path with a barrier.

The instigator of this chaos surveyed everyone with confidence in her eyes. “At least listen to what I have to say first. You’ll begin to feel the effects roughly two hours from now. It comes on pretty strong, so I’ll keep the details to myself. Also, it will last about three days, so you can’t just hole yourselves up in your rooms.”

The explanation was worse than expected, and Tinasha buried her face in one palm, utterly exasperated. Sylvia begged Tinasha in tears, “Can you break the enchantment?”

“This is Lucrezia’s handiwork, so two hours won’t be enough…”

“Oh no…What are we going to do…?”

There was no use in worrying. Dropping her hand, Tinasha crossed her arms and leaned against the chair back. Sighing, she eyed her friend. “All right, what do you want us to do?”

“Your intuition is spot-on.”

“How many hundreds of years do you think I’ve known you?”

The two had shared countless conversations similar to this. A brilliant smile on her lips, Lucrezia held out her right hand above the table. Above her palm floated an image of a ring.

It was a silver band inscribed all over with spell sigils and inlaid with a small garnet.

“I lost this a while ago. I’d like you to look for it.”

“When and where did you lose it?” Tinasha pressed.

“Five hundred years ago at home.”

“That was before I was born! Clean your house!” snapped Tinasha.

“It’s no longer in my house, of that I am certain,” Lucrezia replied.

Tinasha let out a little frustrated groan. Lucrezia loved riddles and using tricks to demand favors of people. There weren’t enough clues to go on, however. Surely, Lucrezia wasn’t so cruel as to deny them their best chance.

“Give me a bit more information. There’s no way I can find it with so little to go on,” pleaded Tinasha.

“I made it, so it’s tinged with my magic.”

“You can’t track it?”

“Nope. I can’t see it,” answered Lucrezia.

There were few scenarios where a witch couldn’t track her own magic. That would place the object either behind an extremely secure barrier or on the person of a powerful magician. The treasure vault was the only place in

the castle with such a barrier. Tinasha herself had reinforced it after the incident with Miralys.

After thinking it over, Tinasha stared at her friend. “Two hours?”

“Two hours. If you make it in time, I’ll undo the enchantment.”

“And if I don’t make it?”

“Then I’ll be entertained.”

“I’ll blast you into the sky,” Tinasha grumbled, getting to her feet. She looked around at the other mages. “Well, guess I better get to work.”

Already, her voice sounded exhausted.

“So I need access to the treasure room.”

“You haven’t told me why. Explain that first,” insisted Oscar, not looking up from his papers. Tinasha had teleported into his study out of the blue.

He was king now, but he still made use of the same rooms he had prior to being crowned. Moving everything had proven too much of a hassle.

Tinasha had predicted his response, and she brought both her palms together before her face and begged, “I would really rather not go into it. There’s no time. Please.”

“No. Tell me. I’m already planning to lecture you later on your secrecy.”

“Urgh…”

The Cuscull fiasco had robbed Oscar of his trust in Tinasha. With a great deal of agony, she managed to relay the gist of her current situation. By the time she finished, Oscar was doubled over with laughter.

“I can see you have no sympathy for our plight…”

“You can’t expect me not to laugh at this. What were all you mages even thinking?”

As the one with the most magic of the entire group, Tinasha could say nothing. Instead, she hung her head dejectedly. Oscar got up from his chair and patted her head. “Well, I find it highly entertaining, so it’s fine by me if you don’t find the ring.”

“It’s not entertaining in the least! Have a little more value for your subjects!”

“You reap what you sow. Don’t eat suspicious stuff,” Oscar chided calmly as he headed for the door. He opened it and turned back to gesture that she come along. “Well, come on. You don’t have much time, right?”

Tinasha perked up and rushed after him.

As Oscar and the witch made their way down the corridor leading to the treasure vault, Oscar went over each and every detail of Tinasha’s predicament.

“So this is really going to affect you, huh? I thought normal magic drugs didn’t bother you.”

“The ones Lucrezia makes are an exception… She’s fed me all kinds of weird potions in the past.”

“And yet you ate something she made again. I don’t get it.”

“Because it tasted good.”

Shortly after passing a group of guardsmen, they came into view of the doors to the treasure vault. Oscar approached and pushed the giant things open. Once inside, Tinasha reached out with her magic to search the place.

It came as no surprise to her that she detected several unknown objects that resonated with strange power, but none of them carried Lucrezia's magical signature.

"It's not here… Hmm, so my guess was wrong…?"

"Too bad," Oscar commented, not sounding like he was really all that worried. Tinasha glared resentfully at the man who looked perfectly content to just watch things play out.

"Do you have any other ideas?" Oscar asked.

"I have one I'm pretty sure about. The Tuldarr treasure vault."

"That exists?!"

"It's been sealed off for a long time, but now that I've taken the throne, I should be able to open it. I'm going to go check," Tinasha declared. She then proceeded to draw up a transportation array.

Oscar stopped her. "Sounds intriguing. Take me with you."

Tinasha was surprised but quickly grinned and took his hand, resetting the array to open up a gate.

The two teleported into the middle of empty wilderness. In the distance loomed the cathedral ruins—the sight of the recent battle. After wandering about for a bit, Tinasha caught sight of something and paused in her tracks. Slowly, she raised her arms above the ground.

"I am queen. Open your path."

In response to her royal decree, a white spell sigil floated up from the earth. Seconds later it vanished, leaving a stone stairway descending underground in its place.

"Whoa, what's this? Amazing," commented Oscar.

"The entrance is enchanted. It's very likely that no one has come in here since Tuldarr fell," said Tinasha, manifesting a ball of light in her right hand and readily heading down the shadowy stairs. Oscar followed her.

After going down two flights of stairs into increasingly stagnant air, they entered a wide room of stone.

The instant they stepped on the ground, candelabra on the walls flickered to life. The glow illuminated messy piles of magical objects on shelves and stone tables. It looked just like the witch's rooms in her tower.

"I've got to make sure to clean up in here from now on."

"Wow… Look at all these magic implements," said Oscar, picking up a nearby crystal ball. Inside of it floated an image of an unfamiliar seaside.

Her eyes focused ahead, Tinasha warned, "Some of these things could be activated by touch. They're dangerous, so try not to touch anything."

"Got it. I'll watch out," said Oscar, returning the crystal ball back to its spot. Tinasha turned away and used her magic to search all around, just as she'd done in Farsas. As nearly every object in the vault was magical, it was going to take Tinasha far longer to distinguish one thing from the next.

Carefully, she sorted through every nook and cranny, taking care not to overlook any small articles.

After he'd wandered all over the treasure vault, Oscar returned to Tinasha's side. "Is it here?" he asked.

"It's…not!" Tinasha cried in horror. Judging by Lucrezia's account, however, it really should have been. Tinasha checked the time and felt something in her stomach drop as she realized only an hour remained. The witch wondered if perhaps it was wiser to return to Farsas and admit defeat to her friend.

As Tinasha fell into panic, Oscar dropped a hand on her head. "Think it over one more time. There's gotta be a clue. What's different about today compared with other times you've met with Lucrezia?"

"Hmm… The most obvious is that I've claimed the throne of Tuldarr. Another would be that I have Pamyra and Renart, but Lucrezia didn't know about them until she arrived at the castle today, so I don't think that's it. The last thing I can think of is that you're a king now."

"That reminds me, I did see Lucrezia once after being crowned."

"You did?" Tinasha inquired. She was interested to know the circumstances of their meeting, but now wasn't the time to ask about that. "I really think it has to do with Tuldarr, since she lost her ring five hundred years ago. Not much remains from that era. It was the Dark Age, after all."

"Are there no other structures still standing?"

"In terms of underground facilities, it's just this and the Spirits' Hall."

At that, Tinasha and Oscar exchanged a glance. Oscar ruffled the witch's hair. "Looks like we know where we're headed next. Can we get there from here?"

"No, they're not connected. I'll have to get the coordinates once we're aboveground. The hall should be located directly below the remains of the cathedral.

The pair returned to the cathedral ruins, then teleported underground from there.

The Spirits' Hall was a round, empty cavernous space paved with stone as far as the eye could see.

Normally, any of the twelve spirits that had not been claimed rested here as statues. Tinasha inherited all of them, however, leaving not even a pebble in the place.

Magic lights in hand, they each took a side of the vast hall and began to explore. Along the way, Oscar discovered a singular door in the outer wall. "Does this connect to somewhere?"

"It actually connects to the castle, but it's probably long since caved in."

Aside from the door, they didn't find anything. They made a loop of the room and met back up in the center.

"Doesn't look like it's here," Oscar observed.

“No, it doesn’t. I can’t sense anything. I think I’ll summon one of the twelve and ask them… King Zayurk reigned five hundred years ago, so I’ll ask one of his old spirits.”

Tinasha shrugged, then called quite casually, “Senn, come here.”

In response, a spirit materialized before them.

“My Queen. What do you need?” asked the spirit in the form of a man in his mid-twenties. His white hair was short and slightly bluish. Crimson burned in his eyes. A devious smirk was on his handsome face.

Tinasha crossed her arms and spoke plainly. “Do you know the Witch of the Forbidden Forest?”

“I know her.”

“I’m looking for a ring she made. It’s a silver garnet ring.”

Since this spirit had been active when the ring was lost, Tinasha thought he may have some knowledge on it. That was why Tinasha had summoned him, but his reply far exceeded what Tinasha had been expecting.

“I have it,” he said.

“You what?! Why?!” she shrieked wildly before she could stop herself. She’d never dreamed that the spirit had the item in question. Her head was spinning as she wondered what in the world was going on, but Oscar poked her in the back to remind her about the time limit. Recalling the urgency of her predicament, Tinasha asked, “Will you give it to me? She wants it.”

“It’s mine. But if the queen wants it, I’ll obey her orders,” he said, looking a little doubtful but still smiling.

Tinasha felt somewhat indecisive. She was resistant to the idea of confiscating someone’s property simply because she was their master. Under the circumstances, Tinasha was left with little recourse than to accept the lesser evil. Looking sour, Tinasha nodded. “Then I’ll make it an order. Give me the ring. Once I’ve given it to the Witch of the Forbidden Forest, I can try to negotiate it back for you.”

“No need for that. If she wants it, that’s all the answer I need,” Senn replied, holding out a hand. Tinasha held out her own in kind. A ring appeared out of thin air and dropped into her palm. She looked it over and confirmed that the sigils and the stone were all that Lucrezia had described.

To make sure she wouldn’t lose it, Tinasha put the ring on her own finger. It was extremely loose on her, as a man’s ring might have been. She closed her other hand around the little trinket.

“Thank you. I feel bad about this,” she admitted.

“It was an easy task. I’ll be off, then,” Senn declared and vanished as quickly as he’d arrived.

The witch turned around and showed Oscar the ring. He stared at how it was practically falling off her slender finger. “You made it in time,” he said.

“Thanks to your help…,” Tinasha replied, breathing a sigh of relief. Then she took his arm and cast a transportation spell back to the castle.

After Oscar gave his impressions of the little adventure—“That was fun”—and returned to his work, Tinasha headed back to the lounge where Lucrezia and the aphrodisiac-dosed mages were waiting.

They were still sipping tea just like when she left, and Tinasha gave them an exasperated look. “I’m glad you’re all taking this so calmly.”

Doan looked up from a spell book, exhaustion plain on his face. “I feel like we’ve had to adapt to all manner of things lately. By comparison, something like this just doesn’t seem worth a fuss…”

The others’ expressions were much the same; it appeared they agreed with him. On the other hand, the woman who was the cause of all this grinned delightedly. “Did you find it?”

“Yes,” answered Tinasha, taking the ring off and throwing it at her beaming friend. Lucrezia snatched it as it arced through the air. The mages all looked at her, nerves taut.

The Witch of the Forbidden Forest rolled the ring around on her finger, inspecting it, then broke into a smile. “Mm-hmm, thank you.”

Everyone heaved a sigh of relief. Tinasha massaged her temples, thoroughly exhausted from yet another day she’d spent wrapped around Lucrezia’s little finger. “Next time, just ask normally,” she insisted.

“Oh, but where would be the fun in that?”

“First things first. Go on and undo the enchantment,” Tinasha urged. Lucrezia reached her left hand out. Instantly, the spell design appeared there before popping out of sight. At the same time, those ensorcelled suddenly felt themselves free of the magic’s insidious effects. As the creator of the spell, it only took Lucrezia a moment to undo it. Anyone else would’ve needed a long incantation and that was assuming they could crack it at all.

“Unbelievable… You always waste so much magic,” Tinasha complained.

“It’s the best I can manage, okay? I’m not like you.” Lucrezia sniffed.

“This is why they call it the Age of Witches…,” grumbled Tinasha as she floated over to her friend. After all that trouble, she wanted a proper explanation.

Tinasha sat down and rested her chin in her hands, looking distinctly displeased. “So what was that all about?”

The oversized ring on her finger, Lucrezia arched an eyebrow. The smile melted off her beautiful face, and she pouted like a child. Throwing Tinasha a sidelong glance, she muttered sulkily, “…I gave it to an old lover of mine.”

“What?” Tinasha said, eyes round and wide. She couldn’t believe what she was hearing.

Ignoring her, Lucrezia waved a hand. “Welp, gotta go!” With that, she winked out of sight.

Left in the dust, Tinasha stared blankly at where her friend had been sitting until just a moment ago. “Wh-what in the world…?”

Something had clearly happened between Lucrezia and the spirit Senn before Tinasha had even been born.

Evidently, there were still things she didn’t understand, even after living for hundreds of years.

Tinasha stared at her bare hand. She had the feeling that the silver ring contained someone’s love and affection.

8. Ocean Blue

It was a rather sunny day, so much so that it was uncomfortably warm, even inside. The witch had just brewed tea in the king's study, and she repeated the words Lazar had said to her, "What? Birthday?"

"Yes, that's right. It's two weeks from now."

"Whose?"

"Mine, of course," Oscar cut in, breaking his silence as he signed another document. Still surprised, Tinasha placed a cup of tea near his free hand.

"So you have a birthday…," she muttered wonderingly, placing the tea tray under her arm.

"What do I look like in that head of yours?" Oscar retorted. His eyes remained trained on the contract he was looking over. His fine features exuded nobility, though Tinasha was long used to seeing them.

Tinasha let her true thoughts slip out. "You're going to be twenty-one, right? …So young."

"Everyone must seem that way when compared with you."

"Mentally, you're like an old man, so it's especially surprising."

"I *will* grind my fist against your head again. Come here," Oscar said, reaching out for the witch. She dodged and leaped back.

Tinasha took a seat in a chair to the side of the table and had a sip of her tea. In sharp contrast to his leisurely protector, Oscar worked hard at progressing through his documents. He worked efficiently from right to left.

"What does 'surprising' mean? Don't you have a birthday, too?" Oscar inquired.

"Yes, I do. I was born just the same as you were. It was two months ago."

"How old are you?"

"I've forgotten… I suppose I'm four hundred plus around twenty or thirty."

"Crazy," Oscar remarked.

Lazar stacked up the papers Oscar was done with and picked them up. The faithful attendant asked his king, "And what should we do for your birthday celebration, Your Majesty?"

“My dad just had his, so we don’t need to do one this year… Too much trouble.”

“But the coronation ceremony was a simple affair, too,” Lazar protested.

“And right after that, I saw just about everyone who’s anyone while we were in Tayiri, so it’s fine,” Oscar argued. While he carried out his duties impeccably, he had little desire to appear at fancy affairs.

Lazar hummed unhappily, but when he considered the situation with Cecelia in Tayiri, he felt some amount of sympathy. He gave up and nodded. “Then I’ll answer as such to the people who have already inquired about the matter.”

“Please do that, thanks.”

Lazar left, his sighs trailing after him. The witch set down her cup and floated up. Fluttering through the air as if she were swimming, she drifted over to a position directly above Oscar’s desk and looked down at him. A bit of her sweet floral perfume tickled Oscar’s nose, and he smiled.

“Is there anything you want?” she asked, her voice like tinkling bells.

“Where did that come from?”

“It’ll be your birthday, so just this once.”

Oscar tilted his head to look up at Tinasha, only to find her grinning in amusement. She looked so innocent—it was hard to believe she had lived for over four centuries.

Oscar paused in his work to consider the question. “You’ve put me on the spot. I can’t think of anything.”

“So you want for nothing,” Tinasha replied doubtfully.

“I’m aware of how blessed I am,” Oscar said, gesturing for her to come closer. She descended until she was sitting on his lap with her legs out to one side. Oscar brushed her hair back, revealing one pale earlobe. He took in her lovely profile and neckline, and his eyes narrowed.

“By the way, about getting married—”

“I’m not going to!” Tinasha cried in her usual way. Oscar made a face as he dropped a hand on her head.

“Then there’s nothing I want. I have you, and that’s enough.”

“Really?”

“Mm-hmm. So don’t dart around hiding here and there. You’re not a little kid, you know.”

Tinasha groaned, aware she could say nothing for herself. In the end, she just looked up at Oscar regretfully.

Little light penetrated the deep canopy of the forest. Thick bushes abounded, seemingly staring at any visitors. Silent in the shadows, they appeared eerie and almost ill intentioned to any humans who wandered through.

Despite the gloom, patches of sunlight filtered down in spots surrounding the cabin tucked snugly away in the woods. One sunbeam generously poured right onto a group of flowerpots. The planters must have

been placed in just the right spot forecast to get sunlight. Wondering at it, Tinasha knocked on the door of the house.

“Oh, it’s you. Come in,” said Lucrezia, appearing at the door. She seemed mid-experiment, as she held numerous tiny bottles between her fingers. Once inside, Tinasha began to brew some tea herself, as she was very familiar with this house.

Soon enough, the two sat down. Tinasha lifted one finger that was wrapped around her teacup to point to the ceiling. “Tell me how to make the pastries from the other day. *Without* the aphrodisiac.”

“They won’t taste the same without it.”

“Seriously?!”

Tinasha often wound up an unwilling live test subject for one of Lucrezia’s potions, but as this only happened once every fifty years or so, she would always forget and recklessly consume a Lucrezia creation again. While Tinasha was extremely cautious in every other area of her life, she was aware that when it came to this, she had a tendency to forget in calms the vows she’d made in storms.

“So why have you come today?”

“Oh, I have something to ask you about. What’s a normal thing to give men?”

“…What in the world?” the Witch of the Forbidden Forest exclaimed, staring nonplussed at her friend after such a random question. Tinasha recounted the events of the conversation back in Oscar’s study.

To Lucrezia, the situation seemed quite trivial, and she offered a simple answer. “If he said he doesn’t need anything, then you don’t need to worry, do you?”

“I’ve been feeling like I owe him a lot lately. Since I have the chance, I’d like to pay him back.”

“Owe him, huh?” Lucrezia said. She rested her chin on her hands as she eyed Tinasha, who was carefully selecting a cookie.

Wanting to give someone a birthday present was so completely ordinary that it seemed exceedingly unordinary for a witch. Lucrezia wondered if Tinasha had realized that.

“So then why did you come to ask me for advice?”

“Because the other day with the ring, you…”

“What?!”

“Nothing,” Tinasha said, electing not to broach the subject after seeing the look her friend gave her.

With hurried bluntness, Lucrezia cut to the chase. “Anything you give him will be fine.”

“I suppose you’re right… Maybe I’ll go take a look around the Tuldarr treasure vault while tidying it up a bit. There might be some intriguing armor in there or something.”

“I am begging you, do *not* make that man any stronger than he already is!” cried Lucrezia. Feigning calm, Tinasha sipped at her tea.

Even so, she did wonder if getting him something he could use every day would be best. The question was what? Maybe some sort of food that wouldn't leave leftovers? Tinasha mulled over the idea as she picked at a cookie. She realized she had almost no experience giving someone a birthday present. If she messed this up, she'd have to consult her memories from before she became a witch. Never had Tinasha considered such an innocuous concept to be so vast.

"I can't think of anything…"

"Give him your body. He'll love it."

"You're a pervert," Tinasha said. She broke her cookie in half, sighing.

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The southern tip of Farsas touched the ocean.

Numerous port cities dotted the mainland's southern coast, and each had long bustled with fishing and trade. Merchants did business with partners in the continent far across the sea to the east, as well as with countries along the eastern coast of the mainland.

One day, an aristocratic merchant ship set off from the port city of Nisrey bound for none other than the eastern country of Mensanne. The ship was laden with pearls and silk goods to sell there, where it would load purchases of grains and spices to bring back to the southern ports.

Soon after departing Nisrey, however, the boat disappeared without a trace.

People suspected that the long-lost ship had been set upon by pirates or that it ran into some sort of accident. No information to support either claim surfaced, however. As time went on, more reports poured in of similar vanishings.

After ten such cases, people began to regard that portion of the ocean as cursed waters that no ship could cross.

"The other day, I replied to the other countries, letting them know about your birthday celebration. Prince Reust of Tayiri sent word that he'd like to make an official visit thanking you for your military aid."

"Turn him away," Oscar replied immediately.

Lazar pulled a face. He sighed as he chided his king. "Please don't be difficult. Farsas can't afford to take a hard stance against Tayiri."

Oscar was quite aware of that, of course.

Farsas had recently sent troops in accordance with Tayiri's request, and everything had wrapped up rather well, given the stakes. One unfortunate outcome was that every other country was now acutely aware that Farsas possessed Tinasha. Fortunately, no other nation openly opposed that, but it was still safest for Farsas to be on its best behavior for the time being.

As if that alone wasn't enough, Oscar had also crossed swords with Reust over his keeping Tinasha's visits a secret. If Oscar was entirely honest with himself, the last person he wanted to see was the Tayiri prince.

Lazar flipped through the papers in his hands. “Even if you refuse him now, the visit is only three days away. Your letter will pass his retinue on the road.”

“I just wanted to say it. I have a feeling I know why Reust is coming.”

“Why?”

“He wants to see her, doesn’t he?” Oscar said, jerking his chin over at Tinasha to indicate her as she entered the room with a book in hand.

As both men’s gazes converged on her, she cocked her head in bemusement. “What are you talking about?”

“You, you traitor.”

Faced with criticism she didn’t recall incurring as soon as she stepped into the room, the witch scowled.

Oscar ignored her and passed some documents to Lazar. “Here, you handle the preparations.”

“Hey, Oscar… What was that just now?” Tinasha inquired.

“Does it matter if you don’t remember?” he retorted shamelessly. It was hardly a satisfactory answer, but Tinasha sank down into a chair anyway. She started to flip through a thick spell book.

“What the—?” she heard Oscar say in a tone of surprise. She looked up to see him frowning down at a document.

As she looked on curiously, Lazar explained, “Evidently, a number of ships have gone missing in the southern sea. The cause is unknown, but the damage keeps piling up. The nobles and the merchants have banded together to request the situation be handled.”

“If they’re going missing on the ocean, it’s probably the work of pirates, right?” Tinasha theorized.

“We had some issues with pirates a while back, but General Als should’ve handled it.”

“Ohhh. Then maybe it’s a sea monster.”

“Do those really exist?” Oscar asked, setting the report down and crossing his arms. It was dangerous to face off against any type of demonic spirit or monster and even more so at sea off some faraway port.

Oscar began seriously considering the sort of team he’d bring while Tinasha gave a brief explanation. “There are many types of sea monsters. There’s huge fish as well as creatures of unknown shapes and sizes. Sea creatures can grow very big. Of course, it’s also possible that it’s just a regular demonic spirit.”

“What falls under the classification of ‘unknown shapes and sizes’?” Oscar questioned.

“Things like gigantic sea anemones… Have you never seen one?”

“I’ve never even seen the ocean,” Oscar admitted.

Next to him, Lazar raised a hand and offered, “Neither have I.”

Farsas as a country was so huge that many people who were born in the capital went their whole lives never glimpsing the sea. Surprised by the response, Tinasha let out a little cry of shock.

“If you’ve never gone to the ocean, can you not swim, either?” she asked.

“I can swim,” Oscar assured her.

“That’s no fun…,” she muttered.

The conversation had gotten off track, and Oscar reeled it back in. “Who do you think is best suited to handling this?”

“It depends on their skill, but if you bring Als, then you’d need about ten people, including mages. That should be enough to handle it. There’s no accounting for the creature’s size, though.”

“Als, huh? He’s more of a land guy, I wonder if putting him on this team is a good idea…”

As Oscar was deliberating over his decision and Tinasha floated directly overhead, she peeked at the papers. “Oh, Nisrey. That really takes me back. In Nisrey, there’s—”

She got that far before she clapped her hands together, having just remembered something. Oscar looked up at the sound. “What’s up?”

“I’m heading out,” Tinasha declared.

“Why so suddenly…?”

“Don’t mind that. I’m going to take care of it!” Tinasha answered, suddenly very excited and in a great mood. Oscar narrowed his eyes suspiciously at her. He wanted to make her tell him what she’d thought of, but he also knew that Tinasha handling the trouble at sea was the safest way to see it done.

As Oscar rested his chin on his knuckles, he remembered something else. “Fine then, go along. Pick out who you want to accompany you.”

“Thank you.”

“Make a weeklong trip of it and get some rest while you’re at it.”

“Your Majesty…,” Lazar objected, appalled. He knew what Oscar was up to. This was a ploy to make sure Tinasha wouldn’t be around when Reust arrived. For a king, he could certainly act very immature.

The witch suspected nothing, however, and replied to Oscar’s seeming generosity with a wide smile that bloomed like a flower.

“I’ll be back by your birthday,” Tinasha promised. She gave a playful toss of her hair before winking out of the study.

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The witch chose Als, Suzuto, Pamyra, and Renart to accompany her.

Als had knowledge of the southern regions of Farsas, and he suggested Suzuto accompany him. That was because he was close with the witch and counted as one of the few people in the castle not afraid of her. Then Tinasha picked Pamyra and Renart. While the two had recently been made Farsasian mages in name, it was more accurate to say they served Tinasha directly. Unlike most other local mages who were terrified of the sea, Pamyra and Renart had volunteered to go on the trip.

The group of five used a transportation array to teleport to a fortress far to the south. From there, they rode on horseback to the port town of Nisrey.

Als had vanquished the southern pirates only three short months ago, and the people of Nisrey had not yet forgotten his deeds. Tinasha's group was met with cheers and applause upon their arrival. Marquis Broguia, the most influential person in the city, welcomed the five into his mansion.

The marquis wore an ashamed expression as he bowed low before Als. "I'm deeply sorry to be troubling you again."

"Not at all. Ships going missing is quite the significant matter. We'll get this resolved as quickly as we can," Als replied formally. While Tinasha was the actual leader, Als took the role of a figurehead so as to ensure her identity as a witch stayed a secret.

Marquis Broguia's eyes widened as he beheld the beautiful woman behind Als, and then he seemed to grow concerned at how small their party was. He suggested sending some of his private officers, but Als refused. "We're only asking for a ship and the sailors to man it."

"I'd be happy to, of course, but… Will you really be all right?"

"We've brought everyone we need," said Als. He flicked his gaze over to the witch, who was looking out the window. She grinned and waved at him.

The next day, the group of five was escorted to the port where they borrowed a medium-sized ship that normally ferried around twenty. The marquis had wanted to lend them an even larger man-of-war, but Tinasha said it would be a waste if it sank.

"Does that mean there's a chance we could sink?" murmured Suzuto. His face looked pale as they sailed out toward where the disappearances had occurred.

"We can't rule it out. I'll do my best to keep us from sinking, though," Tinasha said matter-of-factly.

Als cocked his head in puzzlement. "What exactly are we up against anyway?"

"Based on what I've heard, it's either a demonic spirit or a sea monster. I'm hoping it's the former, because that will be easier for me to handle. I don't like how sea monsters look. They're big and slimy."

"That's your reason…? I think there's bigger problems beyond their size and sliminess…," Als objected.

Pamyra suddenly cut in, raising her hand. "Could it be a kraken?"

The witch frowned at that. Krakens were a famous and gigantic sort of sea monster that lived deep in the ocean. They were said to resemble squids or octopuses. Tinasha's little band was in for a hard-fought battle if their opponent was something on that scale.

After some thought, Tinasha shook her head lightly. "Krakens tend to live only in the northern waters. I don't think one would be this far south unless it'd been specifically summoned."

Suzuto piped up and hesitantly inquired, "Um, sorry to ask something so basic, but does magic not work on things that are underwater?"

The three mages exchanged glances. Renart was the one who answered. "I'm not sure, but I think it's more difficult for a spell to affect something

that’s in the water. If they’re completely submerged, the spells will have almost no effect. You can’t speak an incantation while submerged, so it’s best for us to fight above the waves, if at all possible.”

Tinasha and Pamyra nodded in agreement. Als let out a deep sigh. “We’ll have to lure it out, then. Before the boat sinks.”

“Even if it sinks, we can fly back to land,” the witch said brightly, and Pamyra and Renart grimaced. Tinasha often floated in the air when she was in the study or her rooms, but flight magic required a spell and dedicated concentration. Most normal mages couldn’t fly *and* perform other spells at the same time.

Fortunately, both Pamyra and Renart were highly skilled mages who could do battle while flying. So long as they didn’t need to defend themselves, they could carry the others away. With this crew, they could handle the situation even if the ship was lost.

Owing to the heat, Tinasha’s hair was tied up, and she was wearing a lightweight, boyish outfit. A thin sword was sheathed at her waist, and her overall lithe figure made a perfect picture against the marine backdrop.

As she gazed out at the open water, Als turned back to eye the others. He didn’t know about them, but Als sometimes felt like Tinasha was a natural part of Farsas—and he often found himself forgetting she was a witch at all. He had a hard time believing that she would someday leave the castle.

That was why her leaving for Cuscull had been such a shock to him. Now that she was back, he felt relieved. Als actually couldn’t imagine Oscar marrying anyone but her.

He was unsure how things would truly play out, however. At best, he knew he could only accept whatever came and grow used to it with time.

After about an hour, they reached the area of the ocean where the disappearances had taken place. Far in the distance was the shore, where an intimidating gray quay jutted out from the cliffs.

Als scanned the surface of the water. Nothing appeared out of the ordinary. “All right, Miss Tinasha, what should we do?”

“We’ll be wasting time if we wait to get attacked, so I’m going to send out a scout,” she replied. After a short incantation, a fishlike creature appeared in her palm. Upon closer look, it wasn’t a living creature but a hazily glowing mass of clay. She threw it into the water, where it began to zip along just like a real fish.

“It’s going to loop around the area and search for magic. If something happens, it’ll alert me,” she explained.

“That’s convenient. I guess we’ll break out the booze while we wait,” Als replied.

“You’ll die when you fall in the ocean,” Tinasha cautioned.

Neither of them seemed worried at all, but everyone else on the boat looked pale and drawn. The crewmen were there on the marquis’s orders,

but more than ten ships had gone down already—no exceptions. They wanted to turn around and head straight back to land.

Blessed with fine weather, their vessel bobbed in the blue ocean. A favorable tailwind carried the ship to the middle of the danger zone. Als peered back at the distant sight of land on the horizon. “I’ve come here before. We sank one of the pirate ships around here.”

“Ohhh. Then maybe it’s a ghost ship causing all this trouble,” Tinasha suggested.

“That’s ridiculous. First of all, ghosts don’t exist; you told me that yourself—”

Then Als noticed that the breeze had suddenly died down. The sea was eerily calm. The sailors in charge of adjusting the sails were glancing around uncertainly. Off to one side, waves could be seen rippling out from a point not too far away. Tinasha grinned radiantly after noticing the trembling in the water.

“Oh, sorry. I guess it really is a kraken after all,” she stated.

Screams erupted high into the air.

Ten huge tentacles, each the width of a column, rose from the briny depths.

The half-transparent limbs tried to assail the ship from all sides, but each was stopped by an invisible wall. In the nick of time, Tinasha had thrown up a barrier to protect the boat. Unfortunately, that only provided a moment’s relief before the kraken tried to drag down the ship by way of pulling the barrier itself.

The witch’s eyebrows raised. “This isn’t good. The shield’s got about ten seconds before it breaks. Drive that thing back.”

Als and Suzuto unsheathed their swords while Pamyra and Renart began to chant spells. In the middle of it all, the witch continued to bark her countdown. “…Eight! Nine! Ten!”

On that final word, the barrier shattered.

With nothing stopping the kraken’s tentacles anymore, the slimy things slunk their way over the deck. Pamyra and Renart burned them with magic. One tentacle tried to make off with a sailor, but Suzuto intercepted it with his sword while Als cut it off. The severed limb wriggled fiercely for a moment before a spell from Renart sent it tumbling back into the ocean.

As she burned the other legs, Tinasha conjured another magical shield around the ship. In the face of such an unexpected counterattack, the kraken dragged its arms back into the sea. Pamyra looked out over the slimy deck.

“This is inarguably disgusting…”

“Apparently, you can sell kraken mucus for a high price.”

“Lady Tinasha…”

Their battle with the kraken had lasted only a few dozen seconds, but it had all felt too bizarre to instill fear. Instead there was a strange sort of

mania that hung about the vessel and its crew. Als realized his heart was beating out of control and took some deep breaths.

“If there’s a kraken, then that means there’s someone who summoned it,” Als reasoned.

“Most likely. But I don’t understand what their goal is. The attacks seem completely random,” Tinasha answered.

“Can you kill it?” Als asked.

“That might be difficult unless we can get it to stay above water for more than a few moments at a time. I wonder where its weak spot is…”

No sooner had the words left the witch’s lips than the boat began to rock. Everyone lost their balance and almost fell. Tinasha herself was about to slip, and Als grabbed her arm to support her. He looked to the ship’s bow and saw three fat tentacles coiling around it, pulling the boat up vertically—barrier and all.

“You’ve gotta be kidding me.”

As the bow was hoisted higher and higher, everyone started to topple down toward the stern. Als grabbed hold of Tinasha, who shouted, “Pamyra! Renart! To the sky! We’re abandoning ship.”

The two loyal attendants began their chants while Tinasha took hold of Als.

Als lost his footing, but they escaped into the air a split second before the kraken’s tentacles lugged the hull to one side. All they could do was watch from above as it pulled the barrier with the ship inside down into the inky dark.

Tinasha surveyed the violently roiling waves and scratched at her temple. “I’m definitely glad we didn’t take a big ship. I guess Oscar will have to pay off our debt.”

“I think that necessitates a discussion with Marquis Broguia…,” Als remarked. He had a feeling the marquis wouldn’t mind the loss of an entire fleet of ships so long as it meant the death of the kraken.

Perhaps realizing there was no food on the boat it had sunk, its tentacles began wriggling about the surface in search of new prey before finally disappearing back under the water. Watching from above made it clear how unusually large this specimen was. The whole creature, judging by its limbs, was big enough to eclipse an entire town.

“I’m tracking it, so let’s figure out how to combat it. That should probably wait until we get the sailors back to land, though,” Tinasha said.

Pamyra heeded her lady’s order and opened up a transportation portal in midair. Then she pushed the sailors into it.

At the same time, Tinasha crossed her arms and fell into contemplation. She only spoke up once the sailors were gone. “It looks like the creature’s bound to this particular portion of the sea. That said, it doesn’t appear to be taking orders from anyone.”

“You think someone summoned it and left?” Als inquired.

“No, I think the summoner is here,” she answered.

“Here? You mean, among us?” Als said, pointing to himself.

The witch shook her head, however—a faint smile on her face—and pointed downward. “He’s probably dead. I bet it was one of the pirates you defeated, Als.”

“Huh?” Als was frozen in place as Tinasha gazed back at him with her beautiful eyes.

“Do you mean that a pirate summoned the monster but died before giving it any orders, leaving it trapped in these waters?” Renart theorized.

“That seems the most probably explanation. The summoning must have taken a long time, and this is the result. I’m glad it didn’t happen while you were subduing the pirates, Als.”

“Ugh…I can’t believe this,” Als moaned, faintly horrified as he finally understood. Had his fortune been even slightly less favorable, he would’ve wound up in the kraken’s clutches. While he wasn’t sure whether the beast was an octopus or a squid, he knew for certain that dying while battling a creature like that was not how he wanted to go.

Pamyra turned to her lady and asked, “What shall we do? Fire attacks at the monster or destroy the spell pattern the summoner left behind?”

“Either target would be deep underwater. Hmm, what to do?” wondered the witch aloud. She scanned the air. Her dark eyes came to rest on Als. Tinasha seemed to mentally debate her own idea for a moment, but eventually she pressed her palms together and requested, “Please be our bait.”

“…Oh, you really have *got* to be kidding me,” Als said, echoing what he’d exclaimed earlier. He turned his head skyward in futile supplication.

Still hovering in the air, the group laid out their plan while keeping careful watch on the rolling waves below.

While Als readied his sword, Pamyra and Renart drew up attack spells. Suzuto had managed to avoid being part of the bait, so he stayed aloft with Tinasha and her mages.

Pamyra and Renart cast separate spells, then combined them into one. For her part, Tinasha called up a barrier around Als.

“I’m going to lower you into the water, so draw it toward you. Once it’s hooked, we’ll reel it up.”

“I’d really prefer not to die…,” Als griped.

“I’ll be very careful,” Tinasha reassured him.

The witch checked to make sure her mages had completed their spell, then motioned with her alabaster hands to slowly drop Als down into the ocean. Only his feet sank below the water, but Tinasha’s protection kept Als’s boots dry. The general looked up at his teammates hovering overhead and wondered how long it’d been since he’d felt this helpless and alone. From far away, he could see that the witch’s hands were still moving.

“She really has the perfect personality to be His Majesty’s wife…”

They were definitely alike in how reckless they were. More importantly, Tinasha was powerful and reliable.

Waiting began to make Als anxious, so he swung his sword around as a test. Based on how the water reacted, Tinasha's barrier seemed to be globe-shaped. Curiously, no water leaked in, even if his sword penetrated it. With his blade, Als idly stirred little pools in the sea.

After a little while, bubbles began to gather close to where the kraken had surfaced earlier.

"…There it is," Als muttered. His back felt uncomfortably sticky with sweat. He readied his sword and slowed his breathing. No sooner had he done so than a huge sheet of water rushed up. A gigantic tentacle crept from the depths and encircled him.

The tentacle pressed in to wrap itself around him, but just before its tip could touch him, the globe-shaped barrier began to carry Als up and out of the water. The tentacle was hot on his heels, and Als slashed at it. His cuts were repelled by a nauseatingly elastic surface, however. The kraken's limb retreated slightly but didn't give up the chase.

"Looks like my sword isn't gonna help…"

Als continued to soar upward. Ten huge arms stretched far up toward the sky, pawing after him.

Each limb was taller than a tower. The sight of them wriggling after Als was like something out of a nightmare. Tinasha stared at it from her position in the air, then nodded at the two mages next to her. "It's time. Do it."

At their lady's command, Pamyra and Renart fired their magic down at the same time.

Fierce spears of lightning crashed down, colliding powerfully with the ten tentacles of the kraken. Electrical currents ran through them, and a piercing shriek rent the sky.

The sea monster tried to retract its unexpectedly electrocuted arms, but that wasn't to be. The witch's lips curled in an evil grin. "You can't get away. Who do you think you're up against?"

Using no incantation, Tinasha cast a spell to bind the great sea beast's arms and hold it in the air. Electricity charred its writhing limbs, and a fragrant aroma began to waft through the air. The shocks diffused at the water's edge, however, so they didn't reach the kraken's trunk and head.

"Hmm… Not enough after all," Tinasha murmured, grabbing a cylinder that had been at her waist. She poured five crystal balls out of it and flung them carelessly into the sea. As the little spheres sank, they spread out into a neatly formed circle with the kraken in the middle.

"Renart, could you look after Als?" Tinasha requested.

"Yes, my lady," said Renart who accepted stewardship of Als from the witch.

Now free of distraction, Tinasha began an incantation.

"Let my words sink in. A change of form shall not be a change in quality. The definition will not waver but merely flow and float… Move aside."

In response to her chant, five white lights started fountaining up from underwater. All at once, a white magic circle linking them together appeared in the air. Once the glowing disk surrounded the kraken, the ocean water within its circumference began to slowly drain.

"…Unbelievable," Als breathed. Never had the man dared to envision such an astonishing display of magic. Next to him, Pamyra gasped.

In three minutes, a perfect circle had been cleaved all the way to the ocean floor. The kraken's huge body was stripped of its watery armor, revealing its ugly shape to the open air. Its black eyes, each easily three times the height of an adult human, glared at its opponents with unmistakable ire.

Tinasha scrutinized the sea monster she'd captured. "Is this a squid? Looks like it would be quite tasty."

"Miss Tinasha, I don't know why that's the first thing that comes to mind when you look at that thing…," Als muttered miserably. In contrast, the witch appeared in slightly brighter spirits as she began another incantation.

"Recognize my will as law, transformer that sleeps in the earth and flies in the sky. I control your thunder and summon you. Know my command to be every concept of your manifestation."

When Tinasha finished her chant, ten balls of lightning appeared in her hands. They crackled and popped, sending out silvery branches of light every passing moment.

"Go."

Tinasha glanced at her collected spheres, and they obediently sped off to assail the defenseless kraken. Each one expanded to a tremendous size and affixed itself to one of the kraken's ten immobilized tentacles. Then, with frightening speed, they moved along the limbs as though they were pathways and made for the monster's trunk.

An air-rending sound exploded on impact.

The kraken's arms blackened and crumbled into fragile pieces.

As the lightning attack reached the kraken's head, a drawn-out scream like nails on a chalkboard shook the sea.

The terrible shriek grew fainter and fainter before fading away entirely. As its last cries echoed off into silence, the kraken drooped feebly, still unable to move. One of its large, beady eyes had gone cloudy.

"Is it dead?" asked Als.

"We'll see," Tinasha replied, floating down to inspect. She hovered in close enough to examine the mighty creature's head and eyes.

Suddenly, the kraken's one dead eye regained its dark luster.

In a flash, it regenerated its disintegrated arms. One thin tentacle caught hold of Tinasha's right foot.

"Lady Tinasha!" cried Pamyra, trying to swoop down, but the kraken entwined itself around the witch's body before she could. It tried to draw the witch toward the rows of tiny teeth inside its beak.

Bearing the pain, the witch placed a hand on the tentacle coiled tight around her.

“Dissolve!”

The kraken’s arm exploded. Tinasha kicked away and teleported over to Pamyra. The two of them rose up to come next to Als. “Miss Tinasha, are you all right?” he asked.

“I broke my ankle,” she answered. Looking down, he saw that her right calf and foot were crisscrossed with red bruises from where it had been snared by the kraken’s tentacle. Proper healing was going to take some time.

The witch took a moment to look down at the sea. Her concentration had broken, so the parted water was thundering back to fill the open space. The kraken’s regenerated ten giant limbs were wriggling about.

“This damn squid… How should I deal with you…?” Tinasha muttered hatefully. Suddenly, the creature stopped moving. A huge distortion formed around it, creaking and groaning for a bit like the low growl of an animal. Then the distortion converged toward a central point.

That was when the kraken inexplicably vanished.

Renart finally let a breath out. “Looks like it went well.”

“It certainly looks that way,” the witch said with a shrug. Not a moment later, a young man about Suzuto’s age appeared nearby from thin air.

He nodded to her with a calm expression. “My Queen, your orders have been carried out.”

“Thanks, Nil. And stop calling me ‘My Queen.’”

“But you *are* the queen,” the spirit said crossly.

Next to him, Suzuto looked visibly relieved. “The magic pattern for the summoning has been destroyed. I’m sorry it took so long to find it.”

Als listened to his subordinate’s report, then sheathed his sword and grinned. “You succeeded just in the nick of time. Thanks.”

While the three magic users and Als had faced the kraken head-on, Suzuto had gone diving inside a barrier maintained by one of the witch’s spirits. He’d searched the wreckage of the dozen or so ships sunk by the kraken for the pirate vessel, then—following the spirit’s instructions—used his sword to smash the spell pattern seared into the deck by the summoner.

Once the summoning mark was gone, the kraken was released from its bindings and returned to its original home in the northern depths.

With that, Nisrey’s sailing troubles came to an end.

Mission completed, Als glanced over at the witch floating next to him. “I don’t know what we would have done without you here, Miss Tinasha.”

“Hmm. Maybe Oscar would have come,” she replied, not even joking. She broke into a face-splitting grin. A frightening amount of power was packed into her petite frame.

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On the day before Oscar's birthday, Prince Reust finally arrived in the castle city of Farsas after a long trip on horseback from Tayiri. While his country now tacitly acknowledged the existence of mages, their castle still used no magic at all, which denied him access to teleportation, something the other Great Nations used in abundance.

Oscar was there to greet Reust, welcoming him with formal remarks of gratitude.

News of Als and his party's return came soon after the guest's welcome banquet began. Oscar was given the news while in the grand hall.

He clicked his tongue in disapproval, wishing the journey had been delayed even slightly.

After the magistrate who delivered the missive excused himself, Reust inquired lightly, "What was that?"

"Als and his team have returned from a mission to kill a sea monster. We'll hear the full story from him later."

"General Als? I owe my life to him as well. Would it be all right if we sought an audience with him immediately?"

Oscar wanted to scowl but knew it strange to refuse. He ordered that the new arrivals be summoned to the banquet.

Ten minutes later, the Nisrey expedition team entered the grand hall and bowed. Renart and Pamyra lifted their heads only to catch sight of Reust and freeze. Oscar felt bad for them but noticed that their lady wasn't present. While he wondered at that, he struck up a conversation with Als. "How did it go? I heard you ran into something big."

"Until further notice, consider squid off the menu for me."

"I kinda wish I could've seen it. I bet it'd be tasty."

"You really are two peas in a pod…"

"Who are you talking about? Hey, where's Tinasha?"

Pamyra answered the king. "She has some business to take care of, so she'll return later."

"Got it. Good job out there," Oscar replied.

Pamyra nodded, then she, Renart, and Suzuto bowed and left the hall in haste. Left behind, General Als accepted a glass of wine and offered a formal hello to Reust. The foreign prince looked at him oddly. "Does the witch always go with you on these sorts of expeditions?"

"She does when it's something we can't handle ourselves or when she feels like coming along."

"She's a temperamental one," added Oscar with a wry face, before taking a sip of his own drink.

Normally, Oscar's birthday would be a grand celebration filled with invitees from many nations, but as it was the second birthday celebration that year, Reust was the only guest. That made the event easy to pull together, but a guest was still a guest and had to be attended to. As a result, two hours after the banquet started, Oscar went out to the balcony alone to sober up. He didn't get drunk easily by any means, but he wanted to be as

sober as possible on official diplomatic occasions. He also wanted a break, and he took in the night air while gazing at the scenery outside.

The sun had already set, and faint orange and dark blue streaks intermingled in the sky. The few lingering clouds were dyed golden. The sight so beautiful that Oscar wanted to show it to Tinasha.

As he gazed idly up at the sky, he felt someone behind him and turned around. Reust was standing there with a humble expression, and once their eyes met, he bowed. “I want to deeply apologize for how I behaved.”

Oscar knew exactly what the other man was referring to. He meant when they had ended up crossing swords outside Reust’s chambers.

“I’m sorry, too. If possible, I’d like us to forget all about it,” said Oscar.

“If that’s all right with you, then let’s do just that… Has she been doing well?”

This was probably what Reust had really wanted to ask all along. Oscar smiled and prepared to answer.

Before he could, however, the witch in question teleported right behind him. “Oscar, I’m back,” she said, floating up and throwing her arms around his neck with an innocent smile. She quickly caught sight of the foreign prince in front of her and paled. “P-Prince Reust…”

“It’s been a while,” he replied politely.

She was back, but her timing was supremely unlucky. Suppressing a sigh, Oscar undid her arms from around his neck and moved her to the side. She looked ill at ease as she floated back to the ground. When he looked over, he saw she was wearing a very boyish lightweight outfit.

“What is that getup? Come back after you’ve changed your clothes.”

“I’m sorry,” Tinasha said. She would’ve had her hands full dealing with just Oscar, but there was a guest of honor in their midst, too. The witch looked flustered as she inclined her head to Reust. “I apologize for greeting you like this. I’ll come back later.”

She made to teleport away, but Oscar caught a sense that something was off and grabbed her arm.

“Wh-what?” she asked.

“Is there some magic on your foot? What happened?”

Her eyes wide, she shook her head immediately. “You’re imagining things.”

“There’s no way I am. Show me,” he demanded, reaching out for her bare right calf. Twisting to keep her balance with one leg out, Tinasha floated up and straightened her posture.

“I told you, it’s nothing!” she cried. There was no injury on her slender leg. Oscar frowned at the smooth skin there, but he used his other hand to draw Akashia. She guessed what he meant to do and started to flail, but he held fast to her leg and wouldn’t let her squirm away.

Reust, who had no idea what was going on, wasn’t sure if he should try to defuse the situation. Before he could, Oscar touched the flat of Akashia’s blade to the witch’s leg. Once he did, the magic dispersed.

“I knew it…”

With the glamour dispelled, spirals of red bruises rose to the surface of her skin. The witch turned her head to the side, with *Dammit* clearly written on her face. She’d successfully healed the bones, muscles, and nerves, but she couldn’t erase the bruises permeating her skin.

The sight of red marks twining around her slender white leg was more titillating than painful looking. Reust turned his face away with the distinct feeling that he’d caught sight of something he shouldn’t have.

On the other hand, Oscar examined the marks with a very unhappy look on his face. “You really let down your guard. How could you be so foolish? If you’re going to get yourself hurt like this, I’m not going to send you out the next time. You have to beat it *without* the close call.”

“Okay…”

Oscar released Tinasha’s leg, and she clucked under her breath as she teleported away, clearly too proud to admit she was wrong. He watched her go and heaved a sigh, then winced at Reust, who looked incredibly uncomfortable.

“This is how she usually is,” Oscar explained, his voice laced with much more fondness than exasperation.

Thirty minutes later, Tinasha returned to the banquet dressed in full formal mage’s robes. Clad in white, she was wearing light makeup—meaning Sylvia must have caught her. She was so lovely that her mere presence changed the entire tone of the room.

Once again, she greeted Reust. “I’m so sorry I appeared before you looking like that.”

“Not at all. Defeating the monster must have been quite an ordeal,” he replied.

She flashed him a grateful smile. Her aura was entirely different from when they’d met at Tayiri Castle. Gone was the mysterious and forbidding sense of intimidation. In its place was the calm of sunlight filtering down through a forest. To witness such a transformation in her made Reust feel both glad and lonely.

Tinasha—a person, a witch, and a queen with no throne—changed her aspect like the waxing and waning of the moon. All people had various facets to them, but because she was a witch who had lived for such a long time, each of her qualities was truly differentiated.

She sat down next to him, and as his eyes ran over the delicate planes of her face, he broached the topic on his mind. “Thank you for everything you did back then. What you said gave me a lot to think about…and in the end, I realized I’d never thought about anything for myself. Our god Irityrdia is indeed absolute, but I may have been trying to pretend I was that god myself by throwing around my power and hiding behind his name.”

His halting delivery was awkward and full of self-admonition, but his sincerity was evident. Tinasha was serene as she responded, “Please don’t beat yourself up. We’re talking about a history that’s gone on for centuries.

It would have been very difficult for you to go up alone against that. That said, I think what you've done is incredibly meaningful. Yes… It's very human."

"It's…human?"

"Humans kill people but have the capacity to save them as well," Tinasha said with a smile. She was as radiant as the moon.

A dull pain prickled at his heart. But on the surface, he asked her with a smile, "Incidentally, when are you planning to be married?"

"What?" Tinasha replied blankly, caught off guard. Oscar, sitting across from Reust, cleared his throat and started to laugh. Tinasha finally remembered the excuse by which she was allowed to remain in Farsas. "Oh! Um, well, that's—"

"It's a lie," Oscar interjected smoothly as Tinasha fumbled for how to reply. Now it was Reust's turn to gape. "That was a pretext to bring her back here. In reality, she's only my protector."

For her part, Oscar's protector—not fiancée—looked uncomfortable. Lazar, standing on ceremony behind her, was too shocked to move. He'd never dreamed his lord would tell Reust the truth, not when he'd hated the idea of Reust and Tinasha meeting. What kind of turn of events was this? He dreaded what would come next.

Reust looked back and forth between Oscar and Tinasha, unable to parse Oscar's meaning. After a moment, he dared to ask, "Then what are your plans for marriage?"

"I don't have any," Oscar answered.

"You said she's your protector…?" Reust inquired.

The witch of the tower answered that one herself. "We have a contract. You know that I normally live in the tower, don't you? He climbed all the way to the top, so as his reward, I signed a contract with him."

The witch gave a soft smile. Feeling as if he would be drawn in completely by it, Reust couldn't help but say, "Then what if I could climb the tower? Would you grant me a wish?"

All present, excepting the king and the witch, froze awkwardly. It was completely obvious that Reust was attracted to the witch. But it was also all too certain that the king of Farsas's mood would darken if anyone pointed that out. If things really went wrong, it could mean conflict between the two countries.

While his attendants and confidantes were worrying away, Oscar merely sipped at his drink with perfect composure. The witch looked a little surprised by Reust's question; then she put on a somewhat pained smile. "I don't mind, but I wouldn't recommend it. His Majesty here climbed it easily, but it normally takes a team of at least ten. It's so difficult that I only see successful challengers once in a hundred years—if I do at all. I tamper with the memories of those who fail and transport them to random locations on the mainland, so people with royal responsibilities probably shouldn't attempt it."

Her warning was unshakable fact. Stories of the tower's trials were told even in far-off Tayiri. That included the part where the majority of fearless challengers went out to try their luck and never returned.

The barrier was so high that Reust almost hung his head. He still couldn't quite bring himself to give up, though.

Tinasha was one of a kind.

At that moment, she was within his reach.

It didn't matter to Reust that she was a witch and he was the heir to the throne of Tayiri, a country tough on mages. Reust took her hand and faced her as her eyes widened.

"I…," Reust began.

"Tinasha," Oscar interjected. Tinasha tilted her head to the side, mystified. Oscar used his glass to gesture toward the balcony. Disinterest plain, he offered, "If this is going to be a complicated conversation, could you have it outside?"

"I understand," she said, frowning as she got to her feet.

Looking abashed, Reust took her hand again. "I'll be borrowing her for but a moment. So sorry about this."

Once he'd let the witch out to the balcony, Als hissed in his lord's ear, "You sure you're all right with this?"

"Why should I have to mind the affairs of a woman who's lived twenty times longer than me?"

No one was expecting that reply, and Oscar's confidantes exchanged glances. Oscar, for his part, was eminently calm as he took another sip from his glass.

Reust and the witch returned quickly. Neither of their expressions betrayed any change.

Tinasha sat down next to Oscar, furrowing her elegant brows at his wineglass. "Don't drink so much. You'll die."

"Where did that come from…? I don't know what you mean."

She didn't bother to explain her reasoning. Oscar found it suspicious, but set down his glass and switched to water.

After that, those seated at the table enjoyed pleasant conversation for a while before Tinasha excused herself and went back to her room. With that, the party started to wind down naturally.

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As Oscar changed his clothes in his bedroom, he wondered if he shouldn't take a bath to remove the last lingering traces of tipsiness in his system.

He checked the time and saw that it was almost midnight. He took off his shirt and then heard a rapping at his window. He answered, and the witch opened it and entered. Oscar took one look at what she was wearing and was suddenly struck speechless.

"What's with that outfit…?" he asked.

“It’s easy to move in, and that’s what’s most important to me,” Tinasha answered. She was wearing a black sleeveless dress. It hugged the lines of her torso snugly before flaring out at the waist into a very short skirt. Practically all of her smooth ivory legs were on full display. She was surely wearing underwear beneath it, but such a revealing outfit made Oscar do a double take. The bruises on her legs were all gone; she may have used magic to cover them up again.

Oscar couldn’t tear his eyes away from her creamy, slender thighs. “I don’t know whether to let my eyes drink their fill or avert them…”

“Stop talking nonsense and change into something you can move about easily in, too,” Tinasha insisted. It was only then that Oscar noticed she was carrying several folded bundles of thick cotton fabric. He wondered what their purpose was as he donned a light jacket. Then she called over, “Oh, and tell Nark to come.”

“What the hell…? Do I need Akashia, too?”

“It doesn’t matter too much either way,” Tinasha answered.

Evidently it wasn’t going to be something too dangerous. Nark was sleeping in a corner of Oscar’s room. He roused the dragon and put it on his shoulder. After some deliberation, Oscar ended up bringing Akashia, too.

The witch took his hand and opened up a transportation array right in the middle of the room. The array took them to a spacious, grassy plain. The moon was high and bright in the sky. The witch picked up Nark and bade it grow. From there, they continued their journey on the dragon’s back.

As city lights came into view far in the distance, Oscar asked the witch sitting next to him, “What city are we heading toward?”

“Nisrey,” Tinasha replied.

Oscar was surprised to hear the name of the city where Tinasha had so recently vanquished a sea monster. Looking again, he saw a dark sea spread beyond the dots of light comprising the city. Bluish-white moonlight rippled across the water, glittering silver on cresting whitecaps. The moon’s reflection shuddered ever so slightly as it sparkled luminously.

Oscar could do nothing but gaze out raptly at such overwhelming natural beauty. It was the first time he’d ever seen such a sight. The night sea looked like it could go on forever, tinged with stillness and mystery. Brushing back her black locks, Tinasha grinned. “I really should have taken you during the day, but you were busy.”

“…No, this is great,” Oscar said, still overcome with wonder, and she smiled with satisfaction. Moving up to the dragon’s head, she signaled something to it. The dragon understood and made a slow rotation over the ocean.

“Are you going to show me the kraken or something?” Oscar asked.

“What would you do if I said yes?” Tinasha responded.

“I’d take back what I said to Als.”

The witch could imagine what their conversation entailed, and she burst out laughing. The dragon changed its heading and started to fly along the coast.

Before long, they reached the top of a rocky cliff some distance away from the city and Nark let them down there. It shrank back to its original size and climbed onto Oscar's shoulder.

They were just outside a southern city, and as such, a languid heat clung to the air despite it being nighttime. The high temperatures were probably what drove Tinasha to put on such a skimpy, almost boyish ensemble. She ran her fingers through her hair, mussed by the salty sea breeze.

"Well, shall we be off?" she said, taking his hand. Silently, they rose up into the air and descended slowly down the cliff face toward the ocean. Oscar stared eagerly down at the water; all this was so fresh and new to him. Then he realized there was a cave opening halfway down the cliff. She led him into it by the hand.

The tiny cave was a hollow that sloped down at an angle, and soon enough they entered a wide space filled with seawater. There was a small crack in the rock making up the cave ceiling, letting in moonlight that shone with a blue light on the water.

It looked like the sea had eroded the interior of the cliff over the years to form this space. It was like being inside an eggshell. The rocky enclosure kept the water still and calm.

The witch let Oscar down on a spot along the wall where there was a foothold the size of a closet.

"Let there be light—"

She opened her hands, and white balls of light flared to life. Some flew up to the ceiling and some dived into the water to illuminate the cave.

Immediately, the place took on a cerulean tint.

"What is all this…?" Oscar murmured, his breath taken away by the transformation.

The water gleamed with a brilliant azure hue. The color only intensified deeper into the water. Those conjured luminous globes that had been submerged underwater shone here and there in electrifying and gorgeous shades of cobalt.

Everything glittered like sapphires. Oscar was thoroughly entranced and found himself unable to hold back a sigh of wonder. The witch's smile was one of total gratification. "What do you think?" she asked.

"It's one of the most beautiful things I've ever seen."

"The bottom is sandy, so you can swim without worrying about rocks. There's no fish here, either."

"You want us to swim?!"

"You can, can't you?"

The thick cotton cloths Tinasha had brought must have been for wiping themselves dry after swimming. She placed the towels somewhere they

wouldn’t get wet, then dived into the water without delay. A spray of water sparkled in the air.

“That’s why she’s dressed like that…,” Oscar realized, nodding to himself as he doffed his shoes and jacket. He likewise removed Akashia and placed a sleepy-looking Nark next to the weapon.

The water was deliciously cold when he waded in, and it sent lighting running up his body. It was so hot outside that the chill was quite comfortable and welcome. Oscar dived down to the bottom and found it blanketed with white sand. He glimpsed an underwater cove deeper in. It probably led out to the open sea, but the jagged opening made it hard to tell.

Oscar’s body felt lighter. He hadn’t gone swimming since he was a child, but that had done little to fade his muscle memory.

He swam up to the surface to breathe and found Tinasha floating just above the surface watching him. Droplets of water fell from her long, black hair. Each one carved tiny ripples in the water as they hit the surface. Her glossy skin and ebony eyes, now backlit by azure moonlight, created a fascinating allure.

Using his fingers to comb back his own wet bangs, Oscar asked her, “Did you make this place?”

“It’s entirely natural. I came here a lot to relax back in the day. This is the first time I’ve brought someone with me, though. Oh, it was missing a foothold, however, so I carved one into the wall earlier today.”

She pointed to the little ledge their belongings were resting on. Nark was curled into a ball, snoozing away on top of Oscar’s jacket.

“So…happy birthday,” Tinasha said, pressing her palms together and offering him a pleased smile.

Finally, Oscar understood why she’d brought him here. He reached out and tugged on her hair until she slowly came down to his level. When he touched her cheek, it was oddly warm.

“Thank you,” Oscar replied.

Tinasha suddenly laughed out loud like a child.

By the time Oscar had gotten his fill of swimming and returned to the foothold, a sense of heaviness had permeated his whole body.

He turned back to see the witch still playing in the water. She really looked just like a kid.

Smiling and shaking his head, Oscar grabbed one of the thick towels and dried his hair off. After he’d toweled off his chest and arms, he looked back to ask Tinasha about a change of clothes. Tinasha didn’t answer. Instead, she sat on the water gazing straight at Oscar.

“What?” he asked.

“Nothing, I was just thinking that something looked pretty…”

“What is?”

“You are.”

“What the…?”

Oscar didn't think *pretty* was a compliment generally used for men. But the witch didn't seem to be concerned about that. Her head was cocked to one side as she took in every bit of his beautiful face and well-proportioned body. Beneath the force of her unbridled gaze, Oscar gestured her over.

"What are we doing about our clothes? I didn't bring anything to change into."

"I'll dry them," Tinasha offered, walking along the water's surface as easily as she would have done with solid earth. With one press of her hand to his clothes, warmth circulated along the fabric, drying it instantly, though his skin didn't feel hot at all.

Impressed, Oscar examined his newly dry clothes. Then he remembered something he'd forgotten to ask about. "Oh right, what did Reust say to you?"

"Ah, that? He proposed," Tinasha recounted.

"Again?"

"I said no."

"You shot him down fast."

"I just don't like him in that way…"

"Did you tell him that when you rejected him? That's pretty harsh," Oscar observed, feeling a little bad for Reust.

The witch, still dripping wet, made a disapproving face. "What would you do if I'd said that and relations with Tayiri deteriorated? I turned him down tactfully."

"I see," Oscar replied.

Although they were both witches, he was positive that if it was Lucrezia, she would have happily toyed with poor Reust. The prince was lucky it was Tinasha he'd proposed to—everyone was fortunate for that.

Still, Oscar felt there was something slightly off about what Tinasha said. He'd heard her insist that her being a witch was her reason for not getting overly familiar with anyone.

What change of heart must she have gone through to now say that she didn't like Reust in a romantic way? Oscar found the whole thing strange but had the sense that if he probed too deep, he'd just end up pitying Reust, so he said nothing.

The witch peered at Oscar. "Are you tired? Should we head back?"

"No, I want to keep looking around a little. You brought me all this way and everything," he replied, and Tinasha broke into a happy grin. Her smile was so lovely he could only stare in fascination. Her gaze was soft with joy, and there were no traces of sadness or loneliness to be found.

Seeing that up close sent Oscar into a trance. He tipped up her chin, moving closer to her entirely naturally.

"Hey, wait—!" she cried, paling as she tried to push him away. He only caught hold of her with his other hand, however.

Then he pressed his lips to hers, even as she flailed beneath him. Nothing about the blue-tinted cave they were in felt real, so he made sure she was. Her long eyelashes tickled his face.

First, it was just a light brush of lips, though a lengthy one. Then Oscar changed his angle and kissed her again—and again, kissing her with yearning and the desire to make her body heat, her breath, belong to him. A slow, lazy passion suffused his body; it felt like their souls were melding.

It was all so sudden, and while Tinasha resisted and tried to pull away, Oscar wouldn't allow it.

It was all Tinasha could do to remain standing under such a rain of breathtaking kisses. A mysterious heat welled up deep within her soaking wet body, seizing hold of her thoughts.

She felt faint.

She even forgot how to use magic.

The warmth—and the numbness that came along with it—dominated her body.

That was when the lights around them gave a mighty shudder.

Oscar sensed the lights' flickering and pulled back. With the witch's mindfulness disrupted, the globes had begun to blink on and off. When she realized what was happening, she used her free hand to cover her reddened cheeks. Until now, her control of such a simple spell had never wavered like this, no matter what kind of pain she was in.

"What do you think you're doing…?" she whispered.

Oscar released Tinasha's hand. He'd been clutching it very tightly but fortunately hadn't left a bruise. The witch was red to the tips of her ears, and he patted her head. "Sorry, I wasn't thinking," he said, ostensibly calm.

Tinasha glared at him, her eyes big and resentful.

"I'm gonna swim a little more," Oscar stated unevenly and dived right into the water.

“…What?” Tinasha exclaimed, left behind with a heart that wouldn’t stop pounding. As she massaged her chest, she muttered, “But…I just dried your clothes…”

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Reust left Farsas the next day. The witch offered to teleport him, but he refused firmly. As his retinue of attendants and guardsmen made their way home on horseback, a commanding officer Reust had known for a long time inquired, “Are you really all right with giving up?”

Reust gave a light chuckle, aware of what the guard was referring to. “I was refused flat out. I have no choice but to.”

“But isn’t she simply bound by her contract to Farsas?”

“No…,” Reust said with a wry grimace. Memories of last night flashed through his mind. He’d asked Tinasha the same thing, and she’d been radiant as she answered…

“He’s special. I couldn’t handle another one like him.”

The witch probably wasn’t even aware of it herself yet.

As she’d smiled ruefully, looking the tiniest bit exasperated, Reust had recognized his defeat with perfect clarity, however.

9. Nighttime Serenade

“How much of these stories are even real?” muttered the king at his study desk. The witch was up on the ceiling with a thick spell book open before her. She didn’t know what “these stories” referred to, and she floated down while still upside down to look over Oscar’s shoulder.

“What’s that? A book of fairy tales?” she asked. An elaborate and exquisite illustration dominated the left page; this appeared to be a collection of nursery tales for children. The picture of a princess gazing into an oval mirror looked eerie and old-fashioned.

Oscar closed the book and showed her the cover. “I’m having a quick look through a book we acquired to add to the castle reference library. There’s a lot of weird stories. It’s pretty interesting.”

“Oh, it’s a book from the Dark Age,” observed Tinasha. A request from a historical or literature scholar had most likely brought it to the castle. The tales people used to tell one another back then became fairy tales over time and had all been collected in this tome at some point. Tinasha came down and sat on the edge of the desk. Reaching out for the book Oscar had opened back up, she began to leaf through the pages.

“The story of the Mirror of Oblivion, huh? This is from before my time. I couldn’t tell you if it’s true or not.”

The art depicted a princess gazing into a looking glass. It was an illustration of a story from the early days of the Dark Age. The tale spoke of a princess who spent her days in tears and sorrow after losing her parents. One day, she looked into a mirror and forgot all her sadness. The fable itself had little meaning, but if it was based on a true story, the mirror could have been a magic implement.

Tinasha flipped through more pages as she mused on what sort of spells were responsible for each story.

“Oh, this one’s true. The story of a castle that suddenly got covered in ivy.” Tinasha pointed to the one she was describing.

“That one’s relatively new. I think it’s from the very beginning of the Age of Witches,” Oscar commented.

“Yes, it is. It’s about me.”

"……"

Ignoring the pointed look he was throwing her, Tinasha drifted back up to the ceiling. From below, she heard his heavy sigh.

"That makes me want to appear in one of these odd little stories, too…"

"What do you think you're saying? Have some self-respect," chided the witch. Oscar, evidently rather bored, paid this no mind. Tinasha quickly resumed her reading. As she turned a page, the thought occurred to her: *What kind of king will people say he was?*

Without realizing it, Tinasha began to smile.

There were seven lecture halls for the mages of Farsas Castle. All of them were in use during the day, but permission for after hours could be requested. Six mages were gathered in one such reserved auditorium, forming a circle in the center around two women.

"Pamyra, the transition to the sixth sequence is too slow," said the witch. Pamyra rushed to erase the spell configuration and recast it from scratch. Tinasha silently inspected the intricately woven spiritual magic spell.

No one in the castle but the witch could teach spirit sorcerer magic to Pamyra. She had begged her lady to help her practice, which the witch did often.

Doan, Sylvia, Renart, and Kumu looked on with keen interest. Spiritual magic was a unique form of spell casting that utilized most of its magic in the spell configuration as opposed to spell execution.

"You can't only look at the sequence you're assembling now. You have to be focusing on the whole thing constantly and think ahead to what's next," Tinasha instructed, holding out her right hand palm up. In an instant, a delicately wrought spell formed there. "The kind of spell a mage can envision and execute is one indicator of magic aptitude, but that's not all that matters on the battlefield. Your speed and the stability of your spells are both directly linked to how strong you are. No matter how much magic you have, it's all meaningless if your spells are a jumble."

Pamyra nodded meekly, and the witch smiled at her. She quickly turned serious again, clapping Pamyra on the shoulder. "The truth is, it's most ideal not to encounter a situation where you have to fight directly. For mages, our best fighting style is one that involves preparing spells ahead of time and keeping premade sigils and arrays ready for attack. This is because face-to-face combat involves too many uncertain elements."

"Very illuminating," said Chief Mage Kumu with a nod. The witch found his reaction quite nostalgic. She had lectured the mages of Farsas on how to fight seventy years ago as well. The country had been at war then, so she had prioritized teaching them survival spells over killing ones.

"Now then, how about a little contest?" Tinasha proposed with a light wave of her hand. Before her, a glass ball the size of a person's head appeared.

The glass was hollow, with a tiny ring inside. There were no cracks or seams on the glass, though there was a hole the same size as the ring at the

very top. The aperture was reinforced with a silver inlay around the rim, making it too narrow for the ring to pass through, however.

Tinasha pointed one ivory finger at the glass sphere. “Cast a spell that will pull out the ring inside without damaging the glass sphere. Teleportation magic is disabled. I’ll be looking at your spell-casting speed and method. You have three minutes to devise a strategy. Feel free to touch the sphere and inspect its composition.”

After she finished, she placed the hollow globe on top of a desk. Doan picked it up and spun it upside down. The ring fell down with a tinkling noise, but the silver rim at the bottom blocked it from coming out. The silver rim must have been forged at the same time as the glass, because it was stuck fast to the inside of the sphere.

The mages, given their task, picked the sphere up one by one and pondered over what to do.

“All right, three minutes are up. Is everyone ready?” the witch asked, and the group nodded. Tinasha surveyed the nervous-looking bunch. “Then we’ll start. Five, four, three, two, one, go!”

At the signal, all the mages began their spells. Kumu, Pamyra, and Doan used no incantation, while Sylvia and Renart uttered short chants. Kumu completed his spell the fastest, then Pamyra. The other three completed theirs at nearly identical times after that.

Tinasha studied each spell design, and her eyes narrowed. “Kumu, Pamyra, and Doan are using a method to remove the silver rim. Kumu, your speed and stability are both strong. That’s to be expected… Pamyra, yours is a little too cautious but quite well-made. Doan, your decisiveness is good. You just need to shave off some excess in the third sequence.”

The three felt relieved to hear such positive criticism. Mages did not normally undergo tests, and they were all quite nervous.

“Renart’s spell will create a hole where there is none, then seal it up again once the ring is out. I guess you think you’re better at transmuting the glass than the silver rim?” Tinasha asked.

“That is what I decided, yes,” Renart answered.

“I see. I like this change in thinking. The spell is well-made, too. Carry on.”

“Thank you.”

Last, the witch carefully examined Sylvia’s spell. Unfortunately, she nearly burst into laughter almost immediately.

Shocked, Sylvia looked nervously from one side to the other. Next to her, Doan sounded stunned as he said, “Sylvia, that will break the ring.”

“What? But…”

“It’s fine. I did say not to break the glass, but I didn’t say anything about not breaking the ring. Not bad. This one is the most interesting,” the witch remarked, still giggling with delight. Within seconds, she had a spell drawn up in her right hand. She poured it into the glass ball, and the ring was sucked out right away.

It had happened so fast it looked like teleportation, but the five mages recognized that she'd shrunk the ring, removed it, then restored it to its original size. The quintet of pupils let out cries of admiration. Shrinking spells were difficult and could not be used on living things or anything larger than a human hand. Such magic was so circumstantially useful that it was often forgotten.

"Spell casting is the forging of your idea with your technique, so you should always be practicing. Okay, I'm giving this to Sylvia. I applaud your imagination," Tinasha praised, tossing the ring casually to Sylvia. The other woman caught it with both hands.

"Th-thank you!" she cried.

"It absorbs spells to be launched at a later time. It's a simple magic implement, but you can use it over and over. Feel free to employ it however you see fit."

Sylvia nodded over and over, looking rapturous with gratitude. With that, the special lecture broke up.

"People are talking about a song that kills anyone who listens to it."

"Is the song really bad or something?"

Kumu and Renart returned to their research, while the remaining four moved to the lounge. Doan had been the one to broach the subject over tea, and Tinasha was quick to shoot it down. Doan wagged a finger before his face, however.

"That's the thing. Apparently, the song is very good. The woman singing it is famous as a singer. But everyone who hears it ends up committing suicide."

"No, no, no," cried Sylvia, trembling with her hands over her ears.

Tinasha made a face at her. "Is this really that scary? I very much doubt it's real anyway."

"Oh, but it is. Suicide is on the rise in the city. Dozens are already dead," Doan revealed.

"What?! This is happening here?!" cried Sylvia.

"Yes. It's the talk of the town right now. People have purposely gone and listened to it for themselves, so the numbers have skyrocketed."

"…What in the world?" muttered Tinasha.

Human curiosity was undoubtedly the most frightening part of the rumor. If this was really happening, it was a serious problem.

After listening in silence, Pamyra turned to her lady and asked, "Can magic really cause something like that?"

"I wouldn't say it's impossible, but I would categorize this more as a curse. Still, curses shouldn't have the power to make people commit suicide… Maybe it is some regular sort of spell. That it's afflicted so many is unusual, though. It would be difficult to pull the strings on something like that. Hmm, I'm having a hard time conceptualizing it. This would be hard for a normal mage to do."

"Then what about you, Miss Tinasha?"

“Yes, I could do it. I’d pick someone out of a crowd and kill them while making it look like they committed suicide.”

“……”

Tinasha’s words painted a realistic picture, stunning the group silent. The witch sipped at her tea nonchalantly.

Looking at the clock, Tinasha saw that it was almost three o’clock in the afternoon. She set down her cup and got to her feet. “In any case, could you try and keep Oscar from hearing about this, if you can?”

“Why?”

“He’s been *extremely* bored lately. I wouldn’t be surprised if he said he wants to go and listen to it for himself.”

“…Understood.”

Ever since Oscar took the throne, things had largely calmed down, but this king was incredibly curious and prone to bouts of exploration. Added to that was the fact that this case was occurring right in the castle city. Such a tempting target right under his nose could prove dangerous.

The witch quietly decided she would have to handle this in secret should it continue to be an issue.

“People are talking about a song that kills anyone who listens to it,” said Oscar with great interest as soon as Tinasha entered his study. She sank to her knees in disappointment.

Oscar half rose to his feet, surprised. “What’s wrong? Low blood sugar?”

“…It’s nothing,” she muttered, collecting herself and standing back up. She started to brew some tea. “Who did you hear that from?”

“Lazar.”

“Why, that little…,” Tinasha muttered, cursing the attendant who was thankfully not present. While Lazar frequently worried that his lord would act recklessly, he still brought him all these tales of shady incidents. It was enough for her to suspect that Lazar was riling him up on purpose.

Unaware of what Tinasha was thinking, Oscar asked her if it was possible that magic was causing this, just like Pamyra had earlier.

“I won’t know details until I hear it for myself,” Tinasha stated flatly.

“Oh yeah? Then let’s go check it out.”

“I meant that I would! Alone!” cried the witch. She handed Oscar a cup of tea with a smile.

Oscar noticed that it was a very shallow sort of grin and rested his chin on his hands with a grimace. “You’re not going.”

“Why not?!”

“There’s two singers causing this. One is a tavern singer, and one… works at a brothel.”

Tinasha was dumbfounded at the revelation. Women weren’t allowed in the brothel, but Tinasha had a feeling it was more dangerous for Oscar to go. “You’re the king. Please do not go to a brothel…”

“Lots of people conceal their identities when they go.”

“So that means I could disguise myself as a prostitute and go,” she reasoned.

“Absolutely not. That’s a hard no,” Oscar said.

“Just let me do it!” Tinasha insisted. She grabbed Oscar’s shoulder and shook it back and forth. It jostled the cup in his hand, making the tea wobble. “Didn’t I tell you that the protective barrier won’t protect you from psychological spells? Have you already forgotten the pain Lucrezia caused you?!”

“I don’t recall much pain being involved.”

“I didn’t mean it literally!” Tinasha scolded, releasing Oscar. She gave him a smile with eyes so icy they would make anyone quake in their boots. Oscar beheld Tinasha, unflappable, even as the woman exuded her full witch’s might. “End of discussion. I’m going to do something about the tavern singer first, so you be good and do your work.”

“Fine, I understand,” Oscar answered, waving his hand lightly. The witch remained unconvinced, however.

Tinasha didn’t doubt her own ability to resolve the case, though, so it was fine. She decided to start looking into things immediately, so as not to give Oscar a chance to act. She left the study and headed back to the lounge, where she grabbed Doan.

With Doan recruited for her investigative mission, she had him go over the details as they made their way to the tavern.

The tavern singer’s name was Delia. She was an attractive woman with a good voice that had earned her quite a bit of popularity.

About a month ago, she began singing a new song. The tavern patrons raved about the melody, which was redolent with melancholy and nostalgia. Before long, however, some of them began committing suicide. Not everyone who heard the song was discovered dead, but as about thirty people had already fallen victim to it, the tavern owner was considering canceling the performances.

Once that rumor got out into town, more and more people came to sample the “killer song.” The owner suddenly found himself with a crowd too large to turn away, and performances continued.

The witch was left aghast after hearing the whole story. She frowned. “That’s terrible. I can’t help them if they want to die of curiosity. Are the people going to the brothel acting the same way?”

“The brothel? What are you talking about?”

“I heard there are two singers causing this.”

“That’s the first I’ve heard of it. I only know about Delia.”

“Huh?” Tinasha spat reflexively.

Had Oscar tried to trick her? Maybe he thought she’d give up once she heard the word *brothel*.

“He’s got some nerve trying to pull off a cheap trick on me…”

“I don’t really understand, but please be gentle with our king,” Doan pleaded. Consulting the map, he led the way. The route he chose was very like him: sparsely populated back streets so they could save on trouble.

Tinasha snapped her fingers. “If you like, I can go on alone, and you can head back.”

“Don’t be ridiculous. I’m going, too. I’m a mage, and I don’t believe in superstitions.”

“Come along, then,” urged Tinasha. She was grateful that Doan was possessed of such a no-nonsense temperament. Soon they arrived at the tavern, where the dim lighting conveniently concealed Tinasha’s beauty. It was dinnertime, so they ordered some light food.

The sound of glasses tinkling and low murmurs filled the space. They could hear a fair number of conversations about the song in question.

Namely, people wondering what exactly was this song that killed its listeners.

Dumbfounded, the witch rested her chin on her hands. Then a light shone down on a small stage at the rear of the tavern. The patrons all turned to glance that way.

Doan looked up from his salted fish. “Almost time.”

“Have a defense spell at the ready, just in case. If it’s not magic, I’ll handle it,” Tinasha instructed.

“Understood.”

A woman with all the charm someone in the prime of adulthood could carry appeared onstage. Her features were not outstandingly beautiful, but her dark sensuality was eye-catching. She looked around the crowd, smiling in gratitude, before drawing her right leg slightly behind her.

She took a deep breath in and stood up straight. With only the strums of a zither to accompany her, she began to sing.

“Here is a forbidden place, a room with no air.
I sing a song that no one listens to.
Night falls in my hometown so far away,
where you are not—you are not anywhere.
You’ll never come home despite all my wishing.
Should night come again tomorrow, I may as well die.
Here is a forbidden place, a dream with no air.”

Her voice crooning out a heartrending melody was so lovely that it sank deep into the hearts of the audience. However, a strange unease arose within them the more they listened. Doan glanced over at the witch next to him, who was listening raptly. She must have felt his gaze, because she turned to look at him.

She inclined her head in thought for a moment before suddenly giving a light wave of her hand. Once she did, the song became inaudible.

Flustered, Doan looked all around the tavern, but the other patrons appeared lost in the song. He felt uneasy and was about to get up when the

witch tugged on his sleeve. She leaned over to his seat and whispered, “You’re the only one who can’t hear it. It’s better not to listen.”

“Is it a cursed song? I don’t feel any magic.”

“Don’t worry. I’ll explain outside. Let’s go,” said the witch with an apologetic smile. With urgent haste, she rose from her seat. All except Doan were too enraptured to spare even a single glance at the disturbance.

When they emerged back onto the street, it was completely dark outside. Tinasha spoke once they had put some distance between themselves and the tavern. “So it’s just a song. A genuine song.”

“Just a song?!” he repeated.

“Yes. A normal song with no magic or curse in it. The melody, lyrics, and her voice seem to have a disquieting effect on people. I’ve lived a long while, and I’ve only encountered this a handful of times. It’s exceedingly rare, but there are some songs, paintings, and poems that are like that. Tired and sickly people are particularly weak to this sort of thing. We should pursue the proper channels to get performances of that song canceled.”

“I see…,” Doan said, shoulders slumping. It was a bit anticlimactic. He’d expected to hear some sort of fantastical backstory. Upon finding out it was just a normal song, he felt both relieved and disappointed.

The witch noticed his expression and gave a half smile. “The truly frightening incidences are ones like these, with no magic behind them. There are rules to magic, and we can use those rules to devise a solution. But this probably just stems from the incredible talent of the person who wrote the song and the woman singing it. Encountering a case like this makes you realize how mysterious the human power is.”

Tinasha smiled, her eyes cast down, and asked Doan to file the paperwork to have performances of the song prohibited before returning to the castle. There was a great deal of relief that washed over her as the witch realized that this was the end of the incident.

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While the witch was having dinner at the tavern, the lights went on in an establishment in a back alley on the western side of town.

Unlike those back alleys on the eastern side, these were safer and the clientele tended to be wealthy. This brothel was no exception, and it wasn’t unusual to see nobles sneaking in and out of its doors.

A recent windfall of profit had left this particular brothel’s owner, Gaske, in a fantastic mood.

This was due entirely to Clara. An unceasing stream of clients came seeking her. Even if most of those clients never visited again, enough new ones poured in that it didn’t matter. They were all seized with curiosity and enough baseless confidence to think they’d be fine. It was impossible to correct their misapprehensions.

Gloating to himself, Gaske opened the doors and retreated to the reception booth. Soon enough, the first client arrived.

The tall man with a hood pulled down low over his eyes to hide his face was dressed well. Judging him to be a nobleman, Gaske welcomed him courteously as a guest of honor. The client took the greeting as a sign to get right to the point. “This is where I can find the woman who sings the song that kills its listeners, right?”

Gaske was surprised to hear how young his voice sounded. A series of kidnappings fifteen years ago had left the city with few young adults of noble heritage.

Prying into the identities of patrons ran contrary to the rules. “You mean Clara. Yes, she’s here. But she has a prior engagement at the moment…,” Gaske answered with a smile.

“I see. But if I don’t see her now, I’ll end up caught by someone pesky. Is there any way you can be flexible?”

“I’m really very sorry, sir, but…”

The man grimaced upon hearing Gaske’s reply. He pulled up his hood to show his face. “Do you know who I am?”

There was no way he wouldn’t have. Stunned, Gaske dropped the papers he was holding.

How wonderful it would be to manipulate people with nothing but your thoughts. It was inarguable that many had thought of such before.

Clara had that power; she was certain of it.

She could bend anyone to her will if she only wished to do so. If she wished them to die, they would. All the clients who came to her knowing that must have been dense or otherwise frivolous about their own fates. As such, she felt that it wasn’t her fault if they died.

“Clara, you have a client.”

“Ah, Simon.”

A man holding a zither knocked on the door of her room before entering.

She had known Simon for three years. Clara had found him collapsed outside the brothel with nothing to his name and brought him in. After learning of his musical talent, Clara made him her dedicated accompanist. As she had saved his life, he would do anything she asked. She didn’t want to take him as a lover, but she felt that there was no one who understood her better than he.

Seated before her vanity, Clara stood up as she fastened a clasp into her hair. “My reservation, right? I’m coming.”

“No, it’s a walk-in.”

“A walk-in?”

The brothel where Clara worked saw very high-profile clientele. It wasn’t possible to force your way in using money or pedigree; appointments were required. Who was it that had forced their way in and cut in line? Clara was wholly intrigued.

“All right. I’m coming,” she said, rushing through the rest of her routine. Leaving Simon there, she headed for the designated room.

A huge bed dominated the room. A single window was located very high up on the wall. It was designed that way to prevent peeping, but it made the room feel stuffy.

The man was standing at the entrance, sipping a drink; he turned around when he felt her presence.

He was exceedingly handsome, with eyes the color of the sky right after twilight.

She’d never met him before but recognized him instantly.

Clara froze in shock. She couldn’t take another step into the room.

“What’s wrong? Come in,” the king of Farsas invited her easily, noticing that she wasn’t moving.

Once Clara finally emerged from her cage of astonishment, she sat down gingerly next to the man and poured him a drink. “Is it all right for Your Majesty to be in a place like this?”

“It’s not, which is why I came in secret.”

“Surely you could have any beautiful maiden you desire.”

“The one I’m in love with is pretty stubborn.”

Oscar drained his glass, then set it aside. He gazed back at the woman. She was undoubtedly lovely, though her features gave an impression of instability. He reached out and caught up a lock of her hair. Upon closer analysis, her glossy, soft black hair was a shade lighter than the witch’s. “… Hers really is the color of night.”

“Your Majesty? Did you say something?”

“No, nothing. More importantly, I heard you can sing a very interesting song. I came to hear it.”

“Do you really mean that?”

“I wouldn’t have come if I didn’t. I fear for my life if I ever got caught here.”

Clara was shocked once more into silence. She was different from the woman at the tavern. If Clara wished people to die as she sang, they would. This young king likely had no idea. “Please don’t joke around. You have no heir.”

“Just so you know, I don’t plan on dying.”

“Then please give up on listening to the song,” Clara said.

He placed her ivory white hand along his cheek. His eyes pierced into hers, laden as they were with the power to compel people to obey him. She gasped, feeling as if his blue eyes would suck her in completely.

This wouldn’t do.

She couldn’t sing. Even if she could, she couldn’t kill him. She couldn’t wish for him to die.

She couldn’t kill him.

“I’m asking you to sing.”

“…I’m unable to. In return, perhaps I can offer you something else. This is, after all, an establishment for slaking all manner of desires.”

“I don’t want a woman. I’ve got what I need.”

“Then it seems all you can do is leave. There is nothing I can provide you with, be it a song or my conversation.”

The king scowled in displeasure at that. Up until now, he had generally received whatever he wanted. He’d had the power and the self-awareness to make that possible.

Now he stood bested by a prostitute wielding bargaining as her weapon. Clara would not yield, even to a king.

Instead of speaking, she wound her arms around his neck. Very slowly, she lowered herself onto him. She pressed her lips to his with a clear passion.

It didn’t feel real. She wished this moment would go on forever.

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The day after returning from the tavern, Tinasha headed for the study to report on the events of the last night.

Oscar listened to her while managing a stack of paperwork.

“And I’ve asked Doan to take care of that, so when the application comes in, please approve it,” Tinasha concluded.

“Got it. Sorry to have you go through all that trouble.”

“It’s nothing. Actually, I have a favor to ask. I’d like to borrow some mages for about a week, starting today. I’d only need them in the evenings after they’ve finished their lectures. And I’ll pay their honorarium.”

“I don’t mind. But what are you going to do?”

“I want to organize the Tuldarr treasure vault. The seal is broken, and I can’t have anyone robbing it. So I’d like to sort through everything and move it to the tower…and, if possible, to Farsas.”

“The treasure vault? You’d transport that to Farsas?”

“I won’t use anything even if it’s placed in the tower, so I’ll keep only the dangerous items there. Moving the rest here means that it’ll just end up hoarded away, but I’d still like to.”

“Huh… Okay, got it. Go ahead,” Oscar approved, letting out a little sigh.

With the treasure vault emptied and the spirits brought under the witch’s control, it seemed the entire legacy of the Magic Empire of Tuldarr would soon be entirely lost. Briefly, Oscar wondered if this was really all right. He decided that if this was Tinasha’s decision as the last queen of Tuldarr, then so be it.

The queen with no throne floated up into the air as she always did, flipping upside down and looking Oscar in the eyes. She observed her own reflection in the man’s sky-colored eyes, while Oscar saw his in her ebony ones.

Tinasha looked at him fondly, a softness in her gaze. Released from the delusions of her past, she now gave off an air of innate ease and reliability.

Oscar reached out to draw her face closer. He moved to kiss her red lips, but before he could, she noticed something and cried, “Oh!”

“What is it…?” Oscar frowned, put out at the thwarting of his maneuver.

Tinasha did not heed the gripe, however. She was pointing to his collarbone. “You have a bruise there. Did you run into something?”

That damn woman, Oscar cursed in silence. He took care not to let the emotion show on his face. Things would get nasty if Tinasha discovered his little meddling excursion. She’d warned him so sternly not to get involved, after all. If she knew he’d ignored her cautioning, he would absolutely be in for the lecture to end all lectures. Thankfully, the witch hadn’t caught on.

Tinasha rested her chin on her hands, tilting her head thoughtfully. “I can’t erase your bruise. Do you want me to use a glamour to conceal it?”

“Yeah, could you? Speaking of, how are the ones on your foot?”

“You should worry more about yourself,” Tinasha muttered, looking put out. She placed a small illusory effect on Oscar’s collarbone and then kissed his forehead while she was at it.

That evening, Tinasha brought five mages—Kav, Doan, Sylvia, Renart, and Pamyra—to the Tuldarr treasure vault. The sight was so magnificent that they let out cries of wonder.

“It’s a mountain of treasure!”

“It *is* a treasure vault. Please pick out any items that resonate with faint magical power. We’ll bring those back to Farsas. Anything suspicious needs to be taken to my tower, so set those aside, too. If you find anything that seems like it would be dangerous to touch, let me know. Once it’s all done, I’ll gift you with something here.”

“We’ll do our best!” chorused the group. All six were wearing clothes that were easy to move around in, and they set about classifying the magical objects one by one. It was a lot like packing up for a move. Shouts of admiration rang out everywhere, which the witch found amusing.

Doan waved Tinasha over, and she approached. “I completed the paperwork to have performances of that song canceled,” he said.

“Sounds good. Let me know if there’s any trouble.”

It was enough just to have cut off a potential avenue for Oscar to get into trouble. Humming happily, Tinasha started organizing. Things proceeded without incident.

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Clara hadn’t expected him to ever return.

Her heart was in a flutter at the unexpected visit. As soon as he saw her, he snapped, “Don’t mark me. I told you this was a matter of life and death, didn’t I?”

He was clearly very grumpy, but even that made her happy. She let out a laugh like tinkling bells. “Do you have someone very jealous in your life?”

“I wouldn’t say jealous, but… She’s not attached to me at all,” he admitted with a grimace. A light in his eyes told Clara that he was thinking

of his beloved, and it chilled her to the core. That was an emotion a prostitute should never show on the surface, however. She gave an awkward smile. “Then there’s no need for you to be so faithful.”

“Not attached to me and unwilling to act are two different things. If she finds out I went rogue, she’ll destroy me *and* the country.”

Naturally, Clara took that remark as a joke. The man sat in a chair and took the liberty of leaning against her.

“I’m quite envious that you have someone that concerned about you. What is she like?” Clara asked.

This made him pause and think for a bit. His witch was truly an enigma. It was difficult to put her nature into words to explain to someone who didn’t know her. “Hmm… If I could compare her to anything, it would be purest white and darkest black. She’s like a leopard who enjoys human company.”

“Oh my. She must be a well-brought-up lady who hasn’t suffered a day in her life.”

“She has. Very much, in fact. But that’s not her at all…”

It was true that Tinasha was well brought up, but it was equally true that she’d suffered far beyond the scope of what most were capable of envisioning.

Besides, she wasn’t merely a lady; she was a queen. Oscar had witnessed that firsthand during the Cuscull conflict. That was why she understood better than anyone else the weight borne by royalty.

“Well anyway, about that song. I didn’t come here to bargain with you,” Oscar started.

“I refuse,” Clara stated.

“Don’t be so hasty. Most things can’t kill me.”

“No man has listened to my song and lived to tell of it.”

“Then I suppose that will make me the first.”

Clara was left bewildered that he wouldn’t back down.

She couldn’t sing, for she had no reason to kill him. If she refused outright, however, she feared he would stop visiting. That was no good, either. The woman needed a way to ensure his return. She wanted to touch him. She wanted to steep herself in the heat burning deep in his body, in his skin. That was why she had to barter.

Clara got to her feet and caught hold of his jaw from behind, pressing a kiss to his cheek. “Hmm… If you became my regular, I’d think about it. You’d have to come at least five times.”

Oscar made a plainly sour expression upon hearing Clara’s terms. “I don’t have the time for that. Sing today.”

“I refuse. This is a place where women sell their bodies, not where songs are peddled. If you would like to hear a tune, you must pay the appropriate price.”

The demand caused Oscar to grimace. He wondered if simply giving up was the better choice.

On the other hand, more could die if he turned back now. It would also mean the past two nights of sneaking out had been a waste, something Oscar was loath to admit. He'd considered sending out one of his retainers instead, but if the retainer got killed, he wouldn't be able to live with himself. The witch had reminded him insistently that she couldn't protect him from psychological spells, but the first sign of magical interference would expose Clara outright. At the very least, Oscar felt confident that he could handle whatever might happen better than most people.

"Five times, huh. And you promise?"

"Yes, I promise," Clara replied, feeling as if she were walking on air after hearing his acceptance.

An hour later, Oscar left the brothel. He walked for a short while before stopping and suddenly turning around. He called out to someone in the alley. "Als, I see you."

"Huh?" came an astonished voice from the shadows.

Oscar couldn't help bursting out laughing. "I lied. I didn't actually see you."

"…Your Majesty," said Als, emerging with an awkward bow. He wasn't wearing his jacket, so as not to stand out in the back streets. Mystified, the general asked his king, "When did you notice me?"

"As soon as I came out. We've known each other forever, so I picked you out right away."

"I saw you'd snuck out of the castle, so I couldn't help but follow after."

"I don't mind. This is perfect," Oscar said, falling into step with Als and catching him up on the song that heralded death.

Als's eyes widened with shock. "This is different from the one Miss Tinasha went to see?"

"Yeah. This one is very hush-hush, only spoken of in whispers by noblemen and merchants. When you consider the kind of place it originates from, it makes sense that they don't want it becoming public knowledge. This song's also more powerful than the tavern one—just about everyone who's heard it has perished."

"That's horrifying. And so odd that two singers would appear at the same time," Als observed.

"True… That part is troubling," Oscar agreed.

According to Tinasha's report, the tavern woman was just a singer, but perhaps there was a deeper connection between the two than first believed. Oscar thought it a good idea for him to go listen to the other song once.

"Als, I hate to ask, but I'd like for you to dig up all the details on the people who died at the brothel. Find out their causes of death and any underlying circumstances."

"Yes, Your Majesty. But are you sure you don't want to ask Lazar?"

"No. He's no good at lying to Tinasha."

Als blanched once he heard the witch's name. "Don't tell me you haven't told her about this…"

“If I had, you can bet I wouldn’t be here right now.”

Als suddenly realized he’d been drawn into a nasty secret and immediately felt a bitter sense of regret.

That witch absolutely hated it when Oscar acted rashly on his own. To make matters worse, this was a song that could herald death. If this put the king’s life on the line, Tinasha would be so incensed she might end up risking her own life, too.

Realizing this, Als cocked his head, puzzled. “I wonder if she’d feel jealous if she found out about all this.”

“I don’t think so. She told me herself that I have to start searching for a queen now that my curse was broken.”

“True.”

“Don’t just agree; you’re going to put me in a sour mood. Anyway, that’s why I think she’ll only get upset over the sneaking out and acting reckless parts,” Oscar reasoned.

“Only, huh…? That might be the most frightening thing of all… She’ll have the whole castle disappear.”

Als was filled with trepidation, but Oscar just said lightly, “Well, if I do get busted, we’ll face her together. Collective liability.”

“Spare me…”

“She doesn’t let off people who keep quiet about what they know. Lazar got the screws put to him before.”

The illicit temptation to betray his king and spill everything to Tinasha flitted through Als’s mind. Oscar must have seen right through that, though, because he clapped Als on the shoulder. “And I won’t let you off if you bust me voluntarily. I’ll be waiting on that investigation.”

“…Yes, Your Majesty,” Als complied, accepting his orders with slumped shoulders.

Clara returned to her room and started picking out her outfit for Oscar’s next visit. She couldn’t recall how long it’d been since her heart thrilled with such exhilaration; it actually surprised her that she was still capable of feeling this way. Singing a happy tune, she laid out a bunch of gathered clothes on the bed.

“Clara, what are you doing?” came a sudden voice, and she jumped.

“Oh, Simon. I’m choosing an outfit,” Clara answered brightly.

Simon slanted a look at her. “Do you really like him that much?”

“We’re talking about the king! …No, it’s not that. I like him. There’s no one but him.”

“He’s way above your station.”

“I know that! I don’t want to be his wife or anything. I’m aware of our social statuses.”

“So long as you understand,” Simon replied flippantly, sinking into a rattan chair. He sighed as Clara put together an ensemble, acting as spirited as a teenage girl.

Clara's ear caught the dispirited sound, and she did an about-face. "What? Do you have something to say?"

"He wants you to sing, doesn't he? You should just sing for him."

"I can't. I don't want to kill him…"

"Just sing while wishing he'd fall in love with you."

Clara's eyes grew wide. That hadn't occurred to her. She thought all her powers could do was kill. "Do you really think I can do that?"

"I bet you can. You've got the power."

"Really?" she asked nervously, and Simon laughed.

"I know you can," he insisted.

Simon always knew how to fill Clara with confidence.

The king didn't come the next day. When he did visit on the following day, he brought a little red dragon with him. Clara's eyes sparkled with childish joy upon seeing a dragon for the first time. Oscar made sure to warn her immediately, however.

"Don't touch it. It's not all that tame."

"It's lovely," she breathed.

He gave a strained smile before tossing the dragon a fruit from the plate piled high on the table. Nimbly, the dragon snapped it from the air and swallowed it down.

"I was busy yesterday, and I'll be busy tomorrow, too."

"I don't mind. Naturally your work must come first."

"If that's how you feel, then sing for me today."

"No," Clara declared, jerking her head aside. Thinking of when she'd sing a new song made her heart pound out of her chest. She fought to keep a smile off her face. Oscar paid her no attention and kept tossing fruit to the dragon. Before long, the plate was empty. Oscar's dragon was rather small, and Clara was unsure where the tiny thing was putting it all.

"Should I have a new plate brought up?" she asked.

"Don't bother. It actually doesn't need to eat."

Oscar made no attempt to hide his desire to leave. Clara hated to see it, but it also stirred her desire to change his tune.

Right now, he was hers.

That thought was especially sweet, and it seared itself into her heart. So she wound her alabaster arms around him. Atop the table, the dragon curled up and went to sleep.

※

After four days of organizing the treasure vault, all the magic implements had finally been cleared out. With so much empty space, the repository now looked over twice its size. While the majority of stored items had been small, there'd been a staggering number of them. Sorting through all the trinkets would've been a far greater task than six people could've handled.

Since they were handling magic implements, only mages could help with the task. What's more, it was the Tuldarr treasure vault, so Tinasha could

only allow in people she trusted. The team she'd appointed sifted through the remaining objects efficiently.

As Tinasha categorized a shelf of objects in the back, she noticed a small box made of white stone that had been all but hidden deep in the recesses of the shelf. Pushing aside some other unremarkable things, she reached out and grabbed it.

Opening the lid, she found a blue crystal sphere inside. It was slightly bigger than her palm. Magical sigils she'd never seen before were engraved on the surface. "Hmm? I feel like I've seen this before…"

Tinasha tilted her head to one side and then the other as she pondered but couldn't recall where she'd seen it. The carved symbols were alien to her, and she couldn't so much as manage a guess as to what they did.

After considering it for a while, Tinasha decided it should go to her tower. Placing it with a heap of other magic implements, she returned to the others just in time for Sylvia to run up to her excitedly.

"Miss Tinasha! We found this!"

"What is it?" asked the witch. Sylvia presented her with some lace folded into layer upon layer. Tinasha detected a trace of magic; evidently the stuff was charmed not to deteriorate. She spread it out, taking care not to dirty it, and saw that it was a long wedding veil. "What in the world…?"

"Here, look at this!" Sylvia cried, pointing to the edge of the underside of the veil. There was some tiny silver stitching there.

Suspicious, Tinasha got a closer look. In the script of Tuldarr was written, "To my beloved daughter Tinasha. May you grow up healthy."

"Oh my…," Tinasha said, gaping in shock at seeing her own name there.

This veil was a present sent to the palace from parents whose names and faces Tinasha had never known. They'd sent it as a gift for the child that'd been taken from them.

Tinasha didn't know what to say. Some unknown emotion was burning hot inside her.

Frozen, Tinasha stood there staring at the silver embroidery.

※

On the night of his fifth visit, Oscar again brought the dragon and appeared to be in unusually high spirits. Sprawled on the bed, Clara watched his back as he dressed. "Why are you in such a good mood today?"

"Am I?"

"You're acting like you are."

He chuckled, buckling on his sword belt. "My girl found something interesting. She's so cute when she's happy. And what she found will look really good on her when she's a bride."

"…When she's a bride?" Clara repeated, feeling rage boil low in her belly. While this was a brothel, it was still considered insensitive to discuss other women in the bedroom. Oscar was probably doing it on purpose. He was implying he didn't consider her an option.

Clara understood as much. She meant to keep her feelings to herself, but hearing Oscar speak that way of someone else proved too much to bear. She dug her nails into the pillow. Her obsession with him ran too deep; it tilted dangerously toward hatred.

"I want to kill him…" The unbidden whisper startled even Clara.

"You'll keep your promise tomorrow?" Oscar asked, his tone lighthearted.

"…Yes."

"Don't expect to get off easy if you break your word."

"I am aware."

Oscar left the room without looking back once.

As Clara watched the door close behind him, she weighed her own emotions with lifeless eyes. Should she love him or kill him?

Morning arrived quickly.

Clara had spent the entire time worrying. She didn't sleep a wink, though she might have had flashes of dreams.

Beneath her love for Oscar was a desire to kill him. She herself didn't know what she wanted to do. This was the first time in her life she'd agonized over anything to such an extent.

Unfortunately, the appointed final meeting arrived all too soon.

With makeup covering the dark circles under her eyes, Clara welcomed Oscar with Simon at her side. They did not go to the usual room but to a hall used for banquets.

Oscar was sitting cross-legged directly on the floor, the dragon in his lap. Calm in the face of potential death, he annoyed Clara deeply. "All right, time to let me hear it."

"Are you prepared?" Clara asked.

"I don't plan to die," Oscar assured her. That was enough to settle Clara's mind for her.

His strength was merely arrogance. Why wouldn't he look at her? Was he trying to cast her aside? The more she yearned for him, the more she hated how unshakable he was.

A bitter smile came to her lips. She turned back to Simon and gave a signal.

He strummed the zither, the note trembling in the air and casting a gloomy pall over the room.

Clara took a breath of air and then began to sing. In song, she sobbed out the passions she could no longer hold back.

"Here is a forbidden place, a room with no air.
I sing a song that no one listens to.
A flower falls into my hand, leaving not a single petal behind.
You are not here—you are not anywhere.
My hands grab onto nothing at all.
Should night come again tomorrow, I may as well die.
Here is a forbidden place, a dream with no air."

Clara’s hands trembled.

She didn’t know if she was standing upright. She looked at Oscar and saw that he was listening intently, no change in expression.

She wanted him so badly she thought she’d go crazy.

She was afraid of the song coming to an end. Not even she could guess what would happen when it finally did. Clara’s voice clung to the melody Simon plucked on his instrument, but then she realized he had stopped playing and whirled around.

Simon’s eyes were wide in shock. For the first time, Clara became aware that there was a second voice singing the song. It trilled the same words and hit the same notes in perfect synchronization. Careful listening revealed that the second singer had to be someone other than Clara, however.

Immediately, Clara silenced herself.

A beat later, the other voice stopped, too.

She glanced at Oscar and saw him grinning with amusement. She flew into a rage and shrieked, “Why?! What did you do?!”

“What did I do…? Come to think of it, you wanted to know about my girl. Allow me to introduce Tinasha.”

His final word was addressed to the dragon on his lap. With a glimmer of magic, the creature became an attractive woman.

Her skin was white as porcelain, and her hair was black as night. She was breathtakingly beautiful.

In her dark eyes was a glint of displeasure. From her position on Oscar’s lap, she threw Clara and Simon a cold glance. Oscar kissed the witch’s cheek, then whispered into her ear, “Which one’s the leader?”

“He is,” she replied without hesitation.

“I thought so. I completely wasted my time.”

“Wasted?!” Clara exploded. An insuppressible sense of defeat welled up inside her.

…She never thought it would be *her*.

Fury clouded the courtesan’s mind. She wanted to rip Oscar away from Tinasha.

While Clara seethed, Simon stood up behind her. He reached out a hand to the two guests, but the witch commanded, “Don’t move. If you do, I will judge you to be in opposition and kill you.”

Simon’s lips curled into a sneer. A spell configuration manifested in his open hand.

Then he was sent flying. He collided hard with the far wall and fell limply to the floor. Clara stared at the sight, unable to believe her eyes. She staggered over to Simon, who wasn’t moving. His wrist was bent at a sickening angle. He looked like a broken doll, and Clara saw red.

“What did you do to him?!”

“I warned him,” the witch said, swiftly rising to her feet. Her threatening aura filled and dominated the room.

It was the same pressure that had proven frightening to tens of thousands of soldiers. Clara was undaunted, however.

“How dare you! He was the only thing I had in this world! What do you know?!”

“I won’t know anything unless you tell me. Or was he so important to you that you wish to meet him in death?”

“Die! Both of you!”

Nothing mattered anymore.

After a moment of hesitation in the face of Clara’s mad frenzy, the witch drew up a spell to fire intangible power at her.

From behind, Oscar got to his feet and stayed her hand, however. “Wait—don’t kill her,” he insisted.

Tinasha threw him a sour look. “She might not have been the instigator, but dozens of people are dead.”

“Everyone’s wished they could kill someone.”

“She’s thinking of killing you. A tiny splinter could be made a sword with time. It’s best to nip it off now.”

“Don’t bother with her. Stop.”

Tinasha sighed heavily at getting told over and over to hold back. She dismissed her spell and faced Oscar. “Don’t tell me you’re feeling attached.”

“I’ll take her statement through the proper channels. It’ll teach the noblemen a lesson, too.”

“I wish there was something that would teach *you* a lesson.”

Tinasha waved her hand, and Clara collapsed.

※

With the main offender dead, his accomplice—Clara—was banished from Farsas. As Als looked between Clara’s written testimony and the investigation report, he let out a whistle of admiration. “That Simon guy made it look like suicide, but he was the one actually killing them. What a letdown.”

“That was the easiest way to do it,” replied Tinasha as she sipped her tea in the king’s study. The matter was all resolved now. “The woman had a bit of magic, too. She hadn’t undergone any training, but she could layer it on top of her song to give her a degree of control over the mood of her listener. The audience would get depressed and think they were about to commit suicide. That’s when Simon would strike.”

Oscar voiced a doubt after her succinct summary. “That woman believed herself to possess some other sort of power.”

“Everyone she wished dead went ahead and died one after another. It’s only natural she’d think something like that after a while. The man egged her on repeatedly, too,” Tinasha explained.

“What an incredible tale…” Als sighed, looking up at the ceiling. All the secrets had been revealed, but the case itself remained so peculiar that he had a hard time believing it all. “But what was his aim in the first place?”

Chin resting in her hands and a sullen look on her face, Tinasha answered, “My guess is that Simon just wanted to give Clara what she wanted. Evidently, this all started when a patron cruelly insulted her. Then he created the song for her. Their signal was that she would sing the song to someone she wanted dead. She was the one who selected their victims.”

“And the tavern singer happened to hear the song and decided to make a name for herself by singing it, too?” asked Als.

“The tavern singer was the superior performer. The tune was designed to manipulate emotions. An exceptional voice meant that no magic was needed. To sum it all up, everything stemmed from the man who composed the song. Truthfully, it’s the first time I’ve ever seen such a talent. If he’d been part of the royal court, a skill like that might’ve changed history.”

After Tinasha brought the topic to a close, she returned her empty cup to the tray. Directing a frigid look at Oscar, she asked, “So how much of a lecture do you want to hear?”

Oscar grimaced. “You’ve already blown up the study; isn’t that enough?”

“Of course it’s not,” she retorted.

Als looked around the room. They weren’t in Oscar’s normal workplace. The witch had completely destroyed that room. That had been the perfect opportunity to move Oscar to a room more suitable for a king. At present, Als, Oscar, and Tinasha were standing in the new study. Oscar grumbled as he processed paperwork. “I swore Als to secrecy and everything… I never thought Doan would uncover the composer.”

“How blessed you are to have such talented subjects. If you haven’t learned your lesson, I’ll hang you from the tower.”

After taking care of the tavern situation, Doan had conducted further investigation to prevent any more trouble. In the course of his work, he’d determined that the song originated from a brothel. As soon as Tinasha heard that, she grilled Lazar and confirmed that requests had come in from noblemen.

Then she visited the brothel herself.

On the night before, Oscar had returned from a meeting with Clara and was hard at work with Als. Suddenly, the door to the room blew apart, startling the two men.

The witch strolled in through the wreckage of the door. Her eyes came to rest on Oscar, and she smiled widely. It was the expression of a monarch—bereft of innocence. She opened both arms wide and called up a gigantic spell. Adorably tilting her head to one side, Tinasha asked, “You can die when you hear the song or die now by my hand. Which do you choose?”

“……”

Immediately, Oscar and Als realized their secret was out. Als squeezed his eyes shut in anticipation of death.

Magic rolled off the witch in unrestrained waves. One by one, the vases and jars decorating the room exploded. Oscar considered how to react for a moment. He decided to start by asking, “Where did you hear about it?”

“I interrogated the brothel owner.”

“Is he still alive?”

“I didn’t hurt him, although I don’t think he’ll sleep easy for a while.”

A windowpane groaned a terrible sound before shattering. A calm night breeze blew in from outside.

As that breeze swept past her, Tinasha flashed a wickedly beautiful grin.

It was her witch’s smile, capable of entrancing all who saw it and driving them to death. Her voice sounded like clear ice breaking to pieces as she said, “No matter how many times I tell you, it seems you never quite understand. It’s getting quite irritating. Giving in to curiosity and overestimating your own abilities… Since it sounds like you want to die in a terribly boring way, I can just kill you now. Go on, stretch out your neck.”

She sounded dead serious.

A table and shelves burst to splinters. Als gasped at the frightening level of destruction. He wasn’t sure if he should get between Oscar and Tinasha or not, but he also didn’t think he could do anything to improve the situation.

Oscar stood up and met the witch’s gaze head-on. “Just wait a moment, Tinasha.”

“Shut up.”

The well-constructed desk Oscar regularly used split in two as easily as paper. The walls began to bend at a convex angle with a stomach-churning sound. Powerful winds stirred piles of documents into a vortex.

Oscar strode over the broken desk and approached the floating witch. With a hand, he reached out to her.

“Don’t touch me,” Tinasha snapped, trying to use magic to repel him. However, her own protective barrier canceled it out, and she was unable to.

Oscar pulled her into his arms, center of the storm as she was. “I’m sorry,” he admitted.

“Do you think this is something an apology can solve?”

“I don’t, but I’m apologizing anyway.”

Tinasha bit her lip. She looked down at Oscar with utter detestation.

The witch stared into the king’s eyes. They appeared calm but also slightly anxious.

Despite Tinasha being a witch, Oscar never showed any sign of being afraid of her. She liked that but also hated it.

“I want to bite you to pieces.”

“If that will make you feel better.”

“It won’t.”

“So I’d get bit for nothing.”

Tinasha raked Oscar’s hair up into disarray. She cradled his head and stared at him. “I owe you a lot, so I’m going to let this go. But if you do this again, I’m going back to my tower.”

“I understand. I’ll bear that in mind.”

For quite a while, Tinasha stayed gripping Oscar's head. After venting all her frustration, she released him with a deep sigh. Slipping out of his grasp, she floated into the air.

His life spared, Oscar surveyed the room and blithely declared, "It's totaled."

When the witch heard that, she clicked her tongue in annoyance.

On the day after the old study's destruction, Als was sipping tea in the new study as he muttered, "I really thought I was gonna die. Stop getting me involved in your schemes."

"Lazar said the same thing to me earlier," Oscar noted.

"It's what you deserve," Tinasha spat coldly, though she still refilled Oscar's cup. That done, she sat herself down on the armrest of Oscar's chair. "If you want to go around womanizing, just take an official consort or royal mistress or something. Are you an idiot, wandering around outside like that? Are you an idiot king?"

"It wasn't like I meant to get up to any debauchery…"

"Shut up."

"……"

Evidently, the witch was still angry. Like a child, she kicked Oscar in the shin with her heel. "In four hundred years, I don't think I've ever been this mad, and you're not even an enemy."

"Well then, I'm glad."

"You shouldn't be!"

Using a kick to push herself forward, Tinasha slid off the armrest. Hands on her hips, she faced Oscar and stared him down. "…Well… Even if I get mad, it has no effect on you… So whatever. I feel like I'm just wasting my power by getting upset."

Tinasha gave a little shrug, accompanied by the same sort of cute smile she usually wore. She reached out and patted Oscar's head. The motion was so gentle that his eyes narrowed happily.

Oscar caught the witch's hand and pressed a kiss to the top of it. "Once I have you, I won't need anything else," he said.

"That isn't possible, so you need to choose someone properly," Tinasha replied firmly. Then she let out a loud, high laugh. It was like the sound of a flower bursting into bloom.

10. Moon Fragments

A vast, pale-blue sky stretched out overhead.

Clouds streamed past and filtered the heat of the sun, shielding those below.

Amid this gentle afternoon, the clang of metal clashing against metal echoed throughout the castle courtyard. The clear sound rang brightly. At times, it would come in quick staccato, while at others, it would be a slow legato.

“Don’t fall back right away, Tinasha.”

“Urgh.”

Practice sword in hand, the witch parried blows from a similar weapon. She advanced toward her opponent’s left. Leaning forward lightly, she attempted to knock him off his feet.

Her blade was repelled with a soft clink, however. It went flying out of her hand, rotated several times in midair, and landed some distance away.

“Oh, that was close,” she said, clutching her numb wrist as she eyed the fallen sword.

Oscar rested the flat of his sword on Tinasha’s shoulder as he drawled, “Put up a barrier to repel anyone who might get close. I don’t want stray swords impaling people.”

“All right,” Tinasha agreed, and she jogged over to retrieve the weapon. After checking her wrist, she took hold of the hilt and assumed a fighting stance again.

“Is His Majesty here?” asked Als as he popped into the lounge. He’d looked everywhere for his king, and this was the last place on the list. He cocked his head to the side when he failed to find Oscar there, either.

Kav looked up from the essay he was writing and answered, “He’s outside.”

“Outside?” Als repeated, glancing toward the windows in the back. The mages who frequented the lounge were standing there, watching the courtyard below.

Als joined them and peered down, too. There he found his lord and the witch having a sword fight. “What’s going on here?” he inquired.

Pamyra answered him with a wince. “His Majesty said his reflexes were slowing and dragged Lady Tinasha out there.”

“I see.”

The witch was quite capable with a sword, but Oscar’s superior skill was quite apparent, even at a distance. Als, who fell somewhere between the two when it came to swordsmanship, studied their practice with rapt interest.

“Those two really do get along well,” commented Sylvia.

“I suppose they do,” replied Doan from his spot next to her. Then he remembered something, and an evil smirk crossed his face. “There’s only four months left in their contract. How about we bet on whether they’ll get married before it expires?”

“What?” cried Sylvia. Her brows knitted disapprovingly.

From behind them, Kav declared, “I’ll wager on it never happening,” without even looking up from his writing.

Doan laughed out loud after hearing his challenge so readily accepted.

“I bet that they *will* get married!” Sylvia shot back with a huff. Her cheeks were puffed out.

With sides drawn, the instigator of the wager joined in and said, “I’m with Kav. It won’t happen.”

Als shook his head in exasperation as he listened to the three mages. When the trio looked at him expectantly, however, he admitted, “I think they will. That’s my hope anyway.”

The votes were split half-and-half, and everyone looked pensive. Pamyra, who hadn’t placed a bet yet, offered, “I think the most important issue facing them isn’t their own feelings but the political situation surrounding them.”

“True enough,” Doan agreed with a nod.

Als cut in. “But in terms of someone who’ll be an immediate asset, there’s no better queen than Miss Tinasha. She’s strong, *and* she’s the heir to Tuldarr. She has knowledge and techniques that any other country would love to have.”

“She brought almost all the artifacts from the Tuldarr treasure vault to Farsas,” Pamyra revealed.

“You don’t say,” Als replied. He looked down at the witch in the courtyard with a good degree of shock. She was parrying and thrusting her sword in silence, her lithe form supple and flexible.

Pamyra watched her lady calmly. “I bet they will get married. I’d like her to find happiness sometime soon.”

Unaware she was the subject of much speculation, Tinasha lunged again and once more found her sword knocked away.

Oscar returned to his study, feeling satisfied now that he’d loosened up his muscles. Tinasha, however, flopped onto the couch by the wall as soon as she got through the door. She crumpled into her seat like a boneless cat.

“You all right?” Oscar asked with a frown.

“I’ll be fine once I’ve had an hour to rest. I don’t have a lot of stamina…”

“You should put on a bit more weight.”

“I don’t think I can build any more muscle than this,” she answered, staring at her thin arms and legs. To all appearances, mage’s bodies were low in fat and muscle.

It was stranger still that she could even wield a sword with that physique, but perhaps her many years of experience had afforded her technique enough to compensate. In reality, no one could’ve held something as heavy as a sword without first strengthening their physical form in some way.

“You’re not tired?” Tinasha asked.

“That was just a warm-up for me. Lately I feel like I’m going to rot away behind a desk.”

As she thought about it, Tinasha realized that she’d seen Oscar doing nothing but clerical work for the past three weeks. The last time the king had enjoyed some fresh air and exercise had been during the death song incident.

To Tinasha, Oscar seemed the type who belonged out in the thick of battle. The truth, however, was that he spent almost all his time dealing with documents. He never even took time off. Tinasha felt a bit sorry for him. Oscar was still a young man, after all.

“What do you think about visiting the brothel?” the witch suddenly suggested.

“Are you teasing me?” Oscar asked, incredulous.

“I’m not trying to…,” Tinasha said, floating up into the air and zooming over to his side. She was so tired that it was easier to use magic than walk.

With his free hand, Oscar tugged on a lock of her hair. “I’d rather you take me to the sea again.”

“That’s easy enough,” replied the witch, sinking down onto the edge of the desk and picking up the papers that were left. She felt like there weren’t as many as usual. Checking the clock, she saw that it was only noon. “Then how about I help you with these, and we go somewhere in the evening? We can go to the sea or wherever else you’d like.”

Oscar’s eyes widened a fraction at her suggestion. “We can go anywhere?”

“As long as it’s on the mainland. The city, the mountains, the lake, anywhere.”

“The lake, then,” Oscar decided.

“The lake it is,” Tinasha repeated with a soft smile.

Oscar felt his heart dance with joy like when he was a child.

After all his hard work, he’d earned a bit of fun. So long as he was with his witch, he couldn’t ask for anything more.

With Tinasha’s help, Oscar’s remaining paperwork was resolved in under half an hour. She went back to her rooms to get ready and changed into a light, flowy dress.

“Normally the two of you are busy when you go out together, so relax and enjoy yourselves,” Pamyra said cheerily as she helped her lady change.

Tinasha nodded but picked up on something odd she couldn’t overlook. “Something about what you said makes it sound like we’re a pair of lovers…”

“That’s precisely what it looks like.”

“Wait…,” Tinasha objected, feeling as if something was wrong.

Pamyra gave the witch a placid smile in return. “Judging by appearances, the two of you are very intimate.”

This was a clear wake-up call. When Tinasha reflected on how she and Oscar normally interacted, she could certainly see why things would seem that way. Tinasha acknowledged the facts and let out a sigh. “I guess it’s because I’ve gotten used to him touching me all the time…and I end up touching him, too. If this keeps up for another hundred years, I might end up marrying him by mistake. Scary!”

“Will it really take another hundred years…? And even then, ‘by mistake’…?” Pamyra murmured, feeling incredibly disappointed. She was hoping to see her lady happily wed.

Oscar and Tinasha left the castle before sunset. First, they used Tinasha’s transportation array to jump to her tower; then they flew farther west on Nark’s back. Oscar was in holiday mode, carrying a normal longsword instead of Akashia.

“Which lake are we headed to?” he inquired.

“Lake Soknas in the south of Old Tuldarr. Now it’s part of Magdalsia, I believe. We’re almost there.”

Magdalsia was a small nation in the southwest. Cattle farming thrived there, and mountains and forest dominated the majority of the country.

As they flew through the evening sky on Nark’s back, red slowly began to tinge the sky. The setting sun dipped over the mountaintops. Tinasha pointed to the overlapping peaks.

“There it is, look.”

Tucked between the mountains was a flat stretch of land. Its edges were ringed with trees, and the lake in the center glittered with a reflection of the evening sun. Nark gradually dropped altitude.

“I came here many, many times when I was little. A long time ago, you used to be able to collect bluish crystals called moonstones by the waterside, but I heard that you almost never find them now. I miss them,” Tinasha explained.

“…I see,” Oscar answered.

It was rare for the witch to talk about her past, and Oscar studied her face intently. He saw only nostalgia there, no gloom, and that reassured him.

Nark descended lower and lower. By the time the dragon was about three stories above the ground, it was flying directly over the lake. The

witch leaned to one side off the dragon's back and gazed down below. The water was clear but fairly deep, as the bottom wasn't visible.

"Where should we land?" Tinasha wondered aloud.

"Okay, let's go!" Oscar declared.

"What?"

He scooped her up in his arms and leaped off the dragon.

Her long scream echoed across the lake, followed by a gigantic splash.

Several seconds later, Oscar floated to the surface with Tinasha in his arms. He burst out laughing at the shock on her face.

"Y-you gave me a scare… What do you think you're doing?"

"I thought that would be nice and invigorating."

"It was more like terrifying!" Tinasha cried. She felt all over his body to check for injuries. He'd shielded her from the impact, so she was fine. Most likely owing to the protective barrier, even his sword was still in its sheath. All was well.

Looking up, Oscar saw Nark circling the lake while shrinking smaller; it had noticed its master was gone. Still laughing, Oscar readjusted his hold on Tinasha. "That's the first time I've heard you scream."

"It's been a while since I've heard it myself…," she grumbled, placing a hand on Oscar's shoulder and pushing off up into the air. She wrung out water from the hem of her dress. She hadn't planned to swim today, so the cloth was sopping and heavy. Looking down, Tinasha saw that Oscar had started swimming. Fortunately, the water temperature was perfect. He was having so much fun that he actually looked his age for once, and Tinasha grinned. "It looks like this will be a good break for you. I'm glad."

"All thanks to you. Does anything live in this lake?"

"In the past, it was just ordinary sea creatures, but now no one knows. Try to be careful."

"Got it."

After flying around the area, Nark landed on the witch's shoulder. She lowered herself to the surface of the water and sat down there.

The eastern edge of the lake glittered a crimson shade, while in the west it was dark from the shade of the trees. A pale moon began to claw its way up. The sky was still a few shades lighter than the color of Oscar's eyes.

Tinasha raked back her wet hair. She could use magic to dry it, but it wasn't especially necessary, since it could very easily get wet again. Oscar swam up to her and rested his chin on her knees. "You look like a water spirit doing that."

"Do I? Maybe I shouldn't be sitting on the water."

"Eh, I think it's fine," Oscar said. He tugged on her hair to bring her face close and planted a kiss on her cheek.

Tinasha's eyes narrowed like a cat's, and she gazed back at him with a complicated look on her face. "You know, Pamyra said we seem like a pair of lovers."

“Do you have a problem with that?” Oscar’s counter came so quickly that the witch had to take a moment to consider the question. Even if they seemed that way to others, that didn’t mean anything had actually changed.

“…Not really.”

“I suppose we would, though,” Oscar commented, smiling at Tinasha as he pushed back stray locks of his hair. Most of his smiles were more on the intimidating side—wry smirks or amused grins—so when he showed a simple grin like this, it was utterly captivating.

Tinasha reached out to touch his face. His blue eyes reflected the darkling sky. Upon gazing into them, she thought she could see the moon there, too, and leaned closer for a better look.

That was when Oscar yanked Tinasha down into the water, cradling her in his arms and pulling her to him. Not a moment later, something whizzed through the air. Something flew in from the shore and collided with Oscar’s barrier.

“What was that?!” Tinasha cried.

“An arrow…,” Oscar replied.

Tinasha rushed to catch Nark in her arms as the creature hit the water. Narrowly avoiding sinking, it thrashed in her arms. Oscar stood in front of them protectively, glaring at the shore.

“Did you hit it?”

“I don’t know. It went into the water.”

Five men stared out at the lake surface from the forest at the water’s edge.

It’d looked like someone was sitting on top of the water, but that must have been an optical illusion. One man gave up and shrugged, lowering his bow.

“Would’ve been great to get a water spirit’s treasure, though.”

“If that really was a water spirit, you don’t want to provoke it. And even if you killed it, it would just sink into the lake and you’d never get it.”

“Whatever it was looked human, but it was probably a fish or something.”

The men exchanged disappointed and relieved remarks as they turned back to leave.

Just then, a loud splash came from behind them.

There was a woman standing on the shore that they could see through the trees. Her feet were submerged, and the hem of her black dress trailed in the water. Long jet-black hair and glistening white skin painted a portrait of ethereal beauty.

The men froze, but one of the younger ones pulled out an arrow. Taking that as a signal, the rest of the group did the same.

“Wait. We’re human,” the woman insisted. The men squinted suspiciously at her.

“Human? Really?”

“Yes, really. We came from Farsas.”

“I knew you’d look like a water spirit,” came a new voice. Startled, the group of hapless hunters scanned the woods. They saw a young man leaning against a tree with a sword fastened at his hip. He was dripping wet from head to toe, as if he’d been swimming. “That’s my companion. She’s a mage.”

“Ah…,” the men murmured, finally accepting the explanation. Mages were a rare sight in rural lands, though there were many in Farsas who were ignorant of magic users as well.

A man who looked to be the oldest of the group stepped forward. “We’re very sorry. We were convinced she was a water spirit and acted terribly. Are you hurt at all?”

“I’m fine,” the woman said with a bright smile, coming to stand next to her companion. The men bowed their heads, abashed.

“Normally, we’d be too scared of a water spirit to lay a finger on one, but we panicked…”

“Has there been some sort of problem recently?” inquired the witch.

“No, there’s a festival in our town today,” one hunter explained.

“A festival? For water spirit elimination?” Tinasha repeated, finding it curious. Quickly, she dried her clothes and Oscar’s. The men were thoroughly impressed by the trick.

One man in the middle of the group laughed as he explained, “It’s a marriage festival. Nowadays, the celebration almost never accompanies a real marriage, but the whole town still gets into it. People come from neighboring towns and villages to take part, too. Would you two like to join in?”

“What would that entail?” Tinasha pressed.

“Women just wait in town. Men make the rounds of the lake and rustle up gifts—from nature, that is. They bring them back to the woman they want to propose to.”

“I see.”

Rural areas had curious festivals. Mountain hamlets without much in the way of entertainment might toil all year preparing for festivals like this one. While Tinasha was impressed, she had no intention of participating. No sooner had she opened her mouth to refuse the invitation than Oscar tapped her lightly on the head.

“Sounds interesting. Let’s do it.”

“What?! Wh-what’s gotten into you?” she protested.

“We’re here and everything, so why not? You go head on into town.”

“You can’t be serious… You don’t even have Aka—”

Tinasha was about to say *Akashia* when Oscar ground his knuckles against her temples.

“I’ll be fine. Go on now,” Oscar insisted.

“I didn’t miss you doing this to me! Ow!”

Oscar patted his worrywart protector's head. Leaning slightly, he whispered in her ear, "We're somewhere safe. There's no danger, so relax and wait for me. Things like this can be fun once in a while."

"…All right. We did come here for you in the first place…"

Oscar still had Tinasha's protective barrier, but above all else, he was a strong fighter in his own right. The townsmen saw that they'd wrapped up their discussion and showed Tinasha the way back to the town. Apparently, while there were only five of them now, many more would soon arrive to scour the woods.

Oscar gave the witch a jaunty wave. "Don't follow any men you don't know."

"I'm not some lost child!" Tinasha retorted. While she still felt a bit uneasy, she had no choice but to leave and head for the town.

It only took a few minutes of walking before she arrived at the settlement. The place was in full festival mode. People were crowded onto the narrow streets, with alcohol and food on offer everywhere. It was completely dark, but soft lights gleamed from every direction, giving the whole place a warm glow. The sound of children singing drifted from somewhere nearby.

As Tinasha stood and paused at the entrance taking everything in, an unfamiliar middle-aged woman tapped her on the shoulder. "You're here for the festival, aren't you? Where have you come from?"

"Farsas."

"Another faraway place… Well, you're welcome here. Are you here alone?"

"I came with someone, but he's out gathering things in the forest."

"Ah, so you've got a boyfriend. Then you'll need to change."

"What?"

Before Tinasha could even ask why she needed to change, she was led away.

The middle-aged woman brought Tinasha to the town gathering hall, where she guided the confused witch into a room jammed full of women changing. A chorus of admiring cries rose up from the women near the entrance.

"Wow, so gorgeous."

"Heard she came from Farsas. So sophisticated."

The excited women ushered Tinasha into a chair before she could get a word in edgewise and set about applying makeup to her.

"Um…"

"Don't talk! I'm putting on your lipstick now."

All the ladies surrounding poor Tinasha appeared to be married. They gleefully painted her face. The younger women, on the other hand, were busy getting themselves ready. Tinasha wondered why she'd bothered coming to such a distant place when she could've been subjected to the

same treatment back in the castle. She wanted to run away but knew that it'd upset the people attending to her.

Partway through a little sigh, Tinasha's eyes suddenly widened. Something had made contact with Oscar's protective barrier. A slight fluctuation in magic reverberated within her.

"What's wrong?" asked the woman powdering Tinasha's face after noticing her darkened expression.

"Nothing… I'm just worried about my companion."

"He's fine. You should trust your boyfriend more!" the lady assured her with a grin, clapping Tinasha on the back cheerfully. Worry had already sunk in, however, and Tinasha couldn't shake it.

Finally, the women finished getting ready and trooped out to the town plaza. Tinasha followed, clad in the outfit she'd been forcibly loaned.

The center of the village was now full to the brim with women in gorgeous costumes, filling the place with the bright din of youth. As the women waited for their suitors, men returned from the woods one after another, found their mates, and presented them with gifts. Each presentation earned a chorus of sighing admiration, which in turn only elevated the overall excitement.

Tinasha took in the spectacle, standing at one edge of the plaza with a veil covering her face.

She did have some awareness of how her features made her stand out in a crowd. All she had to do now was meet up with Oscar and go home, but no matter how long she waited, he failed to show. Tinasha detected no further disturbances to the barrier, but that did little to reassure her.

The witch looked up at the sky from the gap in the veil. The moon glimmered translucently in the heavens.

She wondered if she should go after him or not.

It wasn't that Tinasha didn't trust Oscar, but knowing that he was alone made it difficult for her to relax. She was staring at the ground, plagued with indecision, when her veil was suddenly lifted up. Startled, Tinasha looked up.

"Did I keep you waiting?" asked a familiar voice.

Tinasha recognized Oscar and sighed deeply in relief. When they parted, his clothes were dry, but for some reason, he'd gotten all wet again. As she reached out to dry his clothes, she smiled and admitted, "I was worried."

"No trust in me at all, huh? Hold out your hand."

Puzzled, Tinasha held out both hands. Oscar dropped something he'd been holding into them. The five rounded crystals were tinged with faintest blue.

"These are…"

"I bet you haven't seen them in a while, right?"

The townspeople surrounding the pair gasped at the sight of the rare moonstones.

For a while, Tinasha merely stared at the collected stones that rested in her open palms. She recalled the ones she'd once collected herself. They were long gone now.

Warmth bubbled up inside the witch's chest. Blinking rapidly, she felt on the verge of tears. When she looked up at Oscar, he offered her an abashed smile.

"Thank you. I'm really…very happy," Tinasha said, beaming at him. While her childhood was long past, the grin on her face still appeared innocent. She was positive she wasn't doing a very good job of smiling, but she really was very happy.

Oscar leaned in close to her. She closed her eyes and accepted his kiss.

It didn't matter that they looked like a pair of lovers even though they weren't. She couldn't put it into words.

It was enough that he was next to her, touching her.

All of it felt entirely natural, and that's what made it real.

After Tinasha changed back, she and Oscar left the town. From Nark's back, they watched the lake grow smaller and smaller in the distance.

Tinasha was clutching the moonstones protectively. "Where were these?"

"The lake bottom. I grabbed a water spirit and made it show me."

The witch's jaw dropped; she was speechless. This man had the rare talent of finding trouble wherever he went.

Tinasha didn't feel like lecturing him at the moment, however. The moonstones were warm from her body heat.

"When we get back to the castle, will you change their shape and mold them into a necklace or something?" Oscar inquired.

"No… I'll keep them like this."

"Okay then," he accepted, patting her on the head. She closed her eyes, happy.

Oscar's touch was warm and fond, and Tinasha abandoned herself to the memories that washed over her.

11. Green Vines

The wide underground cave was stuffy and damp.

Revered as sacred ground, the hollow had long been kept a secret. A young man clad in blue gazed at murals that illustrated major moments in history. His sword was already wet with blood, red droplets dripping off the tip.

For a time, all was quiet and no one spoke.

A man who'd fallen before the youth looked like he was still breathing, though only faintly. Another man knelt next to him and looked up at the youth in blue.

"Who are you? Why do you have that sword? Only our leader should be able to inherit th—" In the middle of speaking, he caught sight of his elder brother, facedown on the ground. The man's older sibling was the current leader of their clan. Sure enough, his hand was curled around the hilt of a sword identical to the one the mysterious young man was carrying.

There should've only been one of that blade in all the world. What did this mean? Why did this young man have the weapon's twin and know of their holy place? Why had he tried to kill his elder brother?

The man's mind swirled with doubts, and the one garbed in blue looked down at him. "You were just and fair. You treated me sincerely, which is more than I can say for my overly fickle father. It was you who taught me how to fight. I'll always be grateful for that."

"…What did you say?"

He was certain he'd never taught this boy anything. This was their first time meeting. The man's clan was nomadic. They were a band of robbers that drifted from one country to the next. This strange blue assailant had appeared in one of the safe houses the clan maintained.

The man's older brother, the leader, leveled a furious look at the youth. Evidently, the mysterious boy had appeared while they were raiding a town, and they'd chased him off. The leader went after the fleeing boy and entered this sacred place. By the time the leader realized he'd been lured into a deserted area, the one in blue cut him down easily.

The boy ignored his questions and continued blithely, “I actually wish I could’ve saved my mother. But even if I’d prevented that raid, I wouldn’t have disappeared. I know that if I let him live, he’ll make my mother unhappy someday. He’ll burn her village down and take her away, treating her like his plaything. He won’t give her enough food, and he’ll make her sleep on straw. He’ll whip her harder when she gets sick and weak. He’ll try to be a good father to me, but…no father of mine would treat my mother like an old rag.”

The youth’s words were directed at the clan leader’s younger brother, who could only guess at the meaning of the speech. Dazed, he looked at the boy and asked, “What are you saying…? You and he aren’t even that far apart in age. He can’t be your—”

“Exactly. This all happens later for you. But that future isn’t going to exist. I’ve altered it for the sake of my mother.” The boy scowled, and his face steeled against pain. “My mother was a kind and beautiful person. She should never have been forced to live that kind of life…”

The youth in blue let out a deep sigh. Quietly, he spoke into the dark cave.

“After her death…I learned of a way to change the past. Then I came here.”

His voice echoed off the rock walls and faded away. The clan leader’s younger brother ruminated on what the boy had said over and over. Finally, he said, “…So that means you’re…”

What the boy said pointed to only one thing.

He’d come from the near future to change the past. The one in blue was the spawn of the clan leader and some woman he’d abducted. The young man had somehow gone back in time to save his mother from her fate.

It sounded ridiculous, unbelievable even. That the boy carried a copy of the clan leader’s sword was powerful evidence, however. The weapon was only to be bequeathed to the next head of the faction of bandits, after all.

“Tell me your name,” the younger brother of the clan leader insisted, hardly understanding why he’d said it himself. He simply felt like if he didn’t ask now, he’d never know. Nothing would be left of the boy. It would be as if he were never there. Perhaps the man asked for a name because he believed that. For the first time, the boy’s face relaxed.

“You were the only one who was sympathetic to my mother. You helped me when I was little and buried her in her home village. That’s why I’ll tell you everything. My name—and how I came to be here.”

The boy glanced down at his father on the ground. A flowing pool of blood made it clear that he had little time left. That much was clear to all three who were present. The boy returned the sword to its sheath and presented it to his young uncle. “If possible, give this sword to my mother someday. Tell her it’s a gift from someone who wishes her happiness.”

As soon as the boy’s father died, he would wink out of existence with him.

With that moment fast approaching, the uncle accepted the sword…and nodded.

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The eastern side of the mainland was home to the major nation of Gandona and an equally large country called Mensanne. There were many far smaller states that dotted the area as well. This created a land of many crisscrossing international borders. Unfortunately, this often gave rise to conflicts. Many of the smaller domains repeatedly invaded their neighbors.

Yarda's invasion of Farsas ten years ago was one such case. Despite Yarda's sudden attack, Farsas easily repelled the incursion. At the time, Yarda was well on its way to major nation status, but defeat saw it relinquishing half of its land.

One hundred years ago, Farsas built the fortress of Minnedart to keep an eye on its tumultuous eastern border. It was the largest garrison in the country, with thirty thousand troops stationed there at all times to secure the edge of Farsas territory.

"Inspecting the fortress? I'll go, too. If I take my eyes off you, you're bound to wind up in trouble," said Tinasha.

"You're the only one who would say that," returned Oscar.

"Everyone thinks it; they just don't tell you."

Oscar eyed the witch from his desk. She was standing before him, riffling through his stack of paperwork. In three days, Oscar was heading to Minnedart with several military officers to conduct a regular inspection.

As the witch read up on the eastern border, she hummed admiringly. "I see there was a skirmish ten years ago."

"A small one, yeah. You're not really up on this stuff, are you?"

"I normally keep to myself… Ten years ago means you were alive to see it, right?"

Oscar thought that Tinasha's long life often made her phrase things somewhat strangely, but he kept that idea to himself. Instead, he cast back to his memories of the conflict. "Yep. I remember it because during the cease-fire negotiations, Yarda said they wanted me to marry their princess."

"What happened with that?" Tinasha pressed.

"I didn't agree. It only would've made things worse," Oscar explained.

"Oh right," Tinasha said.

At the time, Oscar still had his curse. If the princess from Yarda had gotten pregnant and died, the two nations' tenuous peace would've broken down in a heartbeat.

The curse breaker herself muttered, "Indeed, indeed," evidently having banished all memory of the curse now that it was gone.

It seemed that Yarda bitterly regretted the entire affair, as they interpreted Farsas's inexplicable rejection of the offer to mean that a Yardan princess wasn't good enough to be queen of Farsas. Yarda had been in too weak of a position to back out of peace talks at the time, however,

and ten years had done little to close the power gap between the two neighboring states.

While Oscar attended to other matters, he added, “It’ll take about three days, so pack for that.”

“All right,” Tinasha replied. She returned the papers she’d taken to the desk and vanished from the room. Snorting at how abruptly she’d left, Oscar picked up the documents.

On the day of the observation, Oscar, Tinasha, General Granfort, and three officers used a transportation array to reach the fortress of Minnedart.

Farsas had over forty generals, and Granfort was the oldest among them. His initial misgivings about the witch had softened quite a bit with time. This probably had something to do with Oscar’s father, the former king, recounting the events of seventy years ago to the members of the royal council.

This served to clear up the misconception that Tinasha was a witch scheming to possess the country and revealed that she had claimed the throne of Tuldarr. Someone like that had to be acknowledged as highly valuable to society. Granfort and the others came to welcome her as a counterbalance to Oscar, considering how she often scolded him and kept him in line.

Two generals stationed at Minnedart welcomed the inspection party. General Edgard, who commanded the fortress, was Granfort’s peer. The other, Galen, was a rather young officer of only twenty-seven years. They both appeared surprised to see the witch but concealed that feeling immediately and knelt to bow to their king. Once the ritual greetings were complete, Tinasha tugged on Oscar’s sleeve. “I really think I should have come in disguise…”

“That would be no fun for me. It’s fine,” Oscar replied in clipped tones. Tinasha scowled. As she followed him down a corridor in the fortress, she looked out the window and saw kids playing in a courtyard below. “Children live here?”

“Residents of a nearby village have been living here since last year. The men of the town died in a battle, so Minnedart took in their elderly, women, and children.”

“A battle…” Tinasha sighed. The children’s cheerful shrieks of joy echoed throughout the courtyard.

Carel, a soldier stationed at Minnedart, saw that it was his break time and headed for the courtyard. Once the kids saw him, they dropped the stones they were playing with and ran up to him gleefully.

“Carel! Tell us a story! We want a story!”

“A story, huh? What do you want to hear?”

“The story of the blue knight!”

“Again?” Carel asked. He removed his sword and placed it on the ground before sitting down cross-legged. He was only eighteen. Having joined the

army two years ago, Carel was still at the recruit training stage. The kids surrounded him, their eyes shining with anticipation.

“Once upon a time, when our settlement was a vast prairie, there lived a beautiful girl in a village. A never-ending stream of suitors longed for her hand in marriage. But she turned them all away.”

“I guess none of them were very handsome.”

“Hush and listen. But one day, bad men on horses attacked the village. The bad men set fire to houses, burned the village, and tried to kill people. But then a knight dressed all in blue appeared. He drove out the bad men and saved the girl they were about to carry off. She was deeply moved and said she would be glad to marry him, but he declined and disappeared. The end.”

“Carel, that was over too fast!”

“Tell us a better story!”

The children protested one after another. Carel answered seriously, “It’s all true. That’s your story, and don’t ask for more.”

The kids continued to pout, and Carel was reaching to poke at their cheeks when he heard a young woman giggling from behind him. Whirling around, he saw a lovely and unfamiliar woman standing there. She met his eyes and bobbed her head to him.

“I’m sorry. I was curious about what kind of story you were telling,” said the king’s witch as she grinned.

“If that was over too fast, does that mean the real story is much longer?”

Carel was thrown into a fluster upon learning of her identity, but when Tinasha asked for details about the tale, he sat back down. The children had lost interest and gone off to draw pictures on the ground some distance away.

“The story I told is actually a real thing that happened in our village two hundred years ago. The blue knight was apparently the son of the girl he saved.”

“Er… So you’re saying he came from the future?” Tinasha asked.

“That’s right. He was the son she had after she was kidnapped by the riders. It’s said he came to the past to change his mother’s ill fate. Changing the past in such a way meant he’d never be born, though. Even knowing that, he still saved her… And legend has it that this is the sword the blue knight left behind.”

Carel held up the sword he’d set aside. The hilt was engraved with a horse motif. The blade appeared well used but carefully maintained. That it had been handed down for two centuries suggested there could be some magic housed within it.

The witch examined the weapon, then voiced an objection. “I see… I think this story is far from the kind meant for children.”

As folktales go, it was well made, but it was public knowledge that there was no way to go back in time, even with magic. The part about the knight

coming from the future wasn't true, but it was still an intricately formed story. Tinasha looked back at the kids playing.

"Do they come from the same village as you?" she asked.

"Yes… Actually, our home was attacked by a tribe of riders a year ago… We sent out troops to defend ourselves, but almost all the men were killed. Survivors were graciously allowed to stay here. Sometimes I curse myself for not having been there. I'm sure I could've done something…" Carel bit his lip.

Tinasha's face darkened. According to Oscar, a band of horse riders belonging to no country—a group known as the Ito—had long plagued these lands. They were nomadic and roved from nation to nation. Their raids were sudden, and they disappeared just as quickly as they came. Many attempts had been made to stamp them out, but as they would immediately cross into another country and go into hiding, they'd evaded justice for a long time.

"The village chief's wife hasn't smiled for a whole year because her husband died protecting her. They just crush people's lives underfoot without a care… I can't let them get away with what they do," Carel spat, his hands curling into fists. Anger filled his eyes, as if his hated foes were right there before him.

Revenge begat revenge. Tinasha knew that all too well.

That was why she couldn't allow any threats to Oscar, not even the tiniest seed. She would intervene and nip them in the bud before they could take the form of revenge. She knew they were all laughable tricks. She also knew that she would accept it if she got herself killed someday as a result.

Regardless, she'd lived for far too long to cling to ideals… Her hands were already covered in blood.

After dinner following the first day of inspection, Galen asked Oscar about his sleeping arrangements and Oscar burst out laughing. The rest of the party gaped as their king howled uproariously.

"E-er, did I say something I shouldn't have?" inquired Galen.

"Unbelievable. Did someone put you up to that?" snickered Oscar.

Galen had asked Oscar if the witch would be staying with him. It had seemed to be an innocent enough question, but it just as easily could've been the work of council members who'd pestered Oscar about marriage and heirs. After Oscar declared that he didn't intend to choose anyone but Tinasha, quite a few people were now trying to push him in that direction.

Oscar prepared to tell Galen he was wrong, but Tinasha spoke up first from her place beside the king. With a hint of exasperation, she said, "If Oscar doesn't mind, I don't, either."

"…Do you have a fever or something?" Oscar asked, placing his hand against her forehead in true confusion.

She didn't feel hot, though she did frown at him. "I'm the one who insisted on coming along. It's fine, I'll just change my shape."

"Oh right."

Oscar remembered how she'd recently morphed herself into a dragon like Nark. The witch had the ability to change her outward appearance and age at will. With Tinasha as a wholly different creature, it was true that there would be nothing improper about them sleeping together.

"In that case, I've got no complaints," Oscar declared.

Galen breathed a sigh of relief and departed. Oscar and Tinasha were left alone, and the witch said feelingly, "It's actually perfect. This way I'll know if you sneak out at night."

"There really is no trust in this relationship…" Oscar groaned.

"I'd think it strange if there were," Tinasha retorted coolly, then let out a little yawn.

The after-dinner conference lasted long into the night. The main topic of discussion was Yarda's renewed suspicious activity. Oscar gave instructions to investigate, then retired to his bedchamber. There he found the witch dozing on the couch. It looked like she'd bathed and changed into loungewear.

"Tinasha, don't sleep there," Oscar said, tapping her lightly on the cheek, but she didn't stir.

She'd never know if I snuck out now, thought Oscar ruefully. Unfortunately, even if he did, there was nothing to do right now.

Deciding to let Tinasha have a proper night's rest, Oscar picked up her light frame and carried her to the bed—then he paused. He remembered how she shot up from the bed the last time he laid her down like this.

Trauma from four hundred years ago was the cause of that, but Tinasha might still be plagued by that same nightmare. Even if things with Lanak had been resolved, Oscar couldn't be sure. After a few seconds' consideration, he sat down on the bed with Tinasha in his arms. He lay her down in his lap and poked her cheek again.

"Wake up, wake up."

With a little groan, the witch's eyes fluttered open. Dark spheres heavy with sleep blinked up at Oscar.

"If you're gonna go to sleep, do it in the bed," Oscar chided.

"Okay…," Tinasha murmured, crawling over to a corner of the huge bed with his help. Then she curled up like a cat and fell back to sleep.

While Oscar was relieved to see she wasn't having a nightmare, he realized something else with chagrin.

"You didn't change your shape at all…," he muttered, grabbing a lock of her hair. This time, however, she showed no signs of waking.

Sighing, Oscar covered Tinasha with the blankets and then left to go take his own bath.

※

There were images she could never forget.

Blood and the body of her fallen husband. The young man she could see just past his body. His arm on the ground.

For whatever reason, these gruesome memories of the past played back in black and white.

The only color was the chilling eyes of the man glaring at her.

They were a deep green, the color of a forest that knew no sun.

She didn't want to see him ever again. She didn't want to look.

But that green continued to torment her.

※

After leaving the witch where she was and going to sleep, Oscar awoke in the dead of night with a strange suffocating sensation. He blinked his eyes open but had trouble seeing anything. His body felt heavy. Something warm was touching him.

As that went on, he realized something had slipped between his lips and was licking into his mouth. He woke up instantly.

Oscar was shivering and dizzy all over. The woman's tongue intertwined with his. His hands were held down, and he moved one to touch her cheek.

She noticed it and slowly pulled back. She sat up and lay a hand along his face; he was staring at her. With the empty eyes of a dreamer, she gazed into his blue eyes…and spoke.

"Wrong…," Tinasha murmured, then suddenly shouted, "No!" With that cry, she leaped up.

Oscar gaped at her. "What do you think you were doing…?"

"I got synced up…," Tinasha replied, sounding mortified. She clutched the sides of her head as she leaned over the bed.

As she moaned in distress like a child, Oscar came back to himself and patted her head. "That's enough—just explain. I don't understand what's happening. Did you suddenly feel like marrying me?"

"Not at all…"

"You don't have to answer so fast."

"I was in a deep sleep, so I dreamed on someone else's frequency…"

"What the hell?" Oscar asked, rubbing his temples. The manner in which he'd been roused from bed had left his head spinning. Checking the clock, he saw it was still hours before dawn.

The witch pulled her knees under herself, sitting up straight on the bed. She appeared somewhat more collected now. "Most likely, someone in this fortress is asleep and dreaming of something passionate. They're unconsciously broadcasting those thoughts. The person in question probably has magic, but likely doesn't know how to control it. Something like this wouldn't affect normal people, but I have magic, and I was tired… I guess I picked up on it. I'm sorry!"

"That was bad for my heart."

"Please forget all about it…," the witch begged, groveling. Just looking at her like that filled Oscar with fatigue. He didn't even consider taking advantage of the situation; he was just exhausted. This brief, strange

incident had left him feeling as though heavy stones were weighing down his nerves.

“You said it was wrong. What was wrong?” Oscar inquired.

“Your eye color, I think. It wasn’t green…,” Tinasha admitted.

“I’m glad you woke up,” Oscar said coldly. The witch refused to meet his eyes. Even if his response hadn’t been so frigid, she was still too ashamed of her own conduct. “Anyway, I’m going back to sleep. You better change your shape like you said you would.”

“Okay…”

Oscar lay back down, rolling so that he was facing away from Tinasha. The witch finally lifted her head and changed into a black kitten. Feebly, she wrapped her tail around herself. Unfortunately, sleep proved elusive for her after the shameful mistake she’d made.

When he woke up the next morning, Oscar picked up the curled-up cat by his pillow. The little animal gave a big yawn and jumped onto his shoulder, where it stretched. Oscar stroked its neck and said, his voice low, “If you want to stay a spirit sorcerer, you better remain in that form all day.”

The warning sent a shiver through the cat, and the creature shrank in on itself, ears drooping.

※

During the morning of the second day of inspection, Oscar made the rounds through the fortress. He listened to discussions of repairs for the deteriorating bastion walls. After that, he retired to a makeshift study and reviewed other reports. A few representatives of the refugee villagers requested an audience. Oscar granted it, and in came an elder—the former chief of the village—and a lovely young woman in her late twenties. Her pale golden hair was bound up, revealing the lines of her fine features. Ordinarily she would have been a peerless beauty, but at the moment, pronounced shadows cast a pall over her looks.

Sensing the presence of visitors, the black cat curled up on the corner of the desk lifted its head. It sat up slowly and stared at the young woman. Oscar took notice and glanced at her.

“I see. So it’s you.”

“Excuse me?” the woman asked.

“No, it’s nothing.”

The woman introduced herself as Elze, the widow of the chief who was murdered. Even when she smiled to be polite, sorrow could be felt in every line of her face. With the greetings concluded, she turned to leave, but Oscar called out to stop her. “Did your late husband have green eyes?”

His casual question caused her to stiffen. Her grief-stricken expression froze in shock, which Oscar found suspicious.

“No, they were brown.” The elderly former chief was the one to answer.

“Huh. Ah, sorry for asking about something trivial. You can go,” Oscar declared. Once they’d left the room, he rested his chin on a hand thoughtfully. Bored, he sent the ornamental crystal ball on the desk rolling toward the cat. Its ears perked up, and it pounced on it.

Oscar petted the cat as it toyed with the sphere, and he whispered into its black ears, “Whose dream do you think she was seeing?”

The cat ducked its head in a shrug and batted at the ball again with one black paw, sending it spinning.

Come noon, Oscar rode out of the fortress on horseback with Granfort and the other officers and soldiers.

Minnedart’s inspection was also something of an excuse to check on things in the adjoining country of Yarda. With a black cat riding on his shoulder, Oscar gazed curiously at a reddish-brown, craggy expanse from his perch on a cliff. “The landscape changes as if there really was some sort of boundary. It looks completely different from the fortress’s surroundings.”

“People say this area was formed from some kind of upheaval of bedrock during the Dark Age. There’s even steeper canyons closer to the border and tiny fissures hidden in the ground, so please be careful,” Tinasha warned.

“Will do,” Oscar said.

Rocky hills and jagged peaks of many different sizes clustered together to form a natural wall. The formation had long safeguarded Farsas’s eastern front until Minnedart was built. An incursive force that was marching west into Farsas would have to veer farther south to avoid the difficult terrain. That would put such an army’s path close to the border with Gandona.

Ten years ago, however, Yarda had crossed these precipitous canyons to invade. The eastern half of the rocky ravine had belonged to Yarda at the time, allowing them to lay their preparations without Farsas’s knowledge.

Oscar stroked the cat on his shoulder. “Time to head back. I still have to tour the village.”

Today marked one year since the refugees’ village had been attacked. Plans were underway to help them relocate. Many wanted to look around the ruins of their old home before they did so, however. They had left the fort together and were waiting with a guard escort at the base of the canyon region.

Oscar grabbed the reins and turned his horse around. Avoiding the protruding rock pillars that dotted the landscape, he guided his steed as it snaked its way down. As Oscar was jolted along in the saddle, he took in the sharp features of his surroundings. “When I’m with Tinasha, we teleport places a lot. It’s nice to travel normally for once.”

When the black cat heard that, it whapped Oscar’s head with a front paw. The king didn’t look like he minded the cat’s slaps, however. The rest of the party, following behind, didn’t know quite how to respond and stayed silent.

Once they were halfway through their descent, Oscar’s horse suddenly stopped. The black cat on his shoulder raised its head.

“Your Majesty? What’s wrong?” called Granfort. Before Oscar could respond, a shadow loomed overhead.

Looking up, they saw a full lineup of men stood on the rocky hills towering on either side. Each man had an arrow readied.

The king had close to fifty of the projectiles pointed at him. With startling calmness, he mused, “Ito, huh? I thought you were a horse tribe. Where are the horses?”

“Y-Your Majesty… You shouldn’t provoke them…,” Granfort insisted.

“Tinasha, don’t make a move. Stay down,” Oscar instructed, giving his protector a concise order. Hearing her name calmed the men’s nerves a fraction. But the cat, half on its feet already, threw him a look of protest before reluctantly settling back down on his shoulder.

One of the Ito archers stepped forward. He was tall and appeared to be in his early thirties. He looked down on the Farsasian party with eyes the same deep green shade as a sunless forest.

“I’m the leader of the Ito. I want to talk to the most powerful one among you.”

“I guess that’d be me,” Oscar drawled. Then, with all the majesty of a king infusing his tone, he went on to command, “Give us your name.”

The people of Farsas all sat up straight at that, and the archers recoiled slightly as well. Only the man who’d declared himself the Ito leader met Oscar’s gaze without flinching, though he did seem surprised. He threw out his chest and declared arrogantly, “My name is Javi. We want something and came to negotiate.”

“You’re awfully shameless for a thief. We wouldn’t mind cutting all of you down right here, right now,” Oscar needled.

“That’s some big talk considering the situation you’re in. Don’t you have eyes?” Javi retorted. He probably reasoned that with all his archers’ arrows trained on the Farsasian party from the high ground, they could kill the whole lot of them in a second. The instant a single shaft was loosed, however, it would be the Ito who fell. Oscar had only traveled to the border with a small party precisely because it was fewer people to protect if a fight broke out.

The king of Farsas responded with a shrug.

“You all can think what you want. Looting’s been our clan’s way of life for a long, long time. We take pride in it. How is that different from taking an army and attacking another country? I’m following a much more honest way of life than a man who doesn’t fight and just gives orders,” Javi snapped.

A cynical smile played about Oscar’s lips as the fur of the black cat on his shoulder bristled. It opened its mouth to growl threateningly, but Oscar picked it up by the scruff of its neck. He ignored the little animal’s struggling.

“You do love to talk, don’t you? What do you want?” asked Oscar.

“A woman,” Javi answered.

At that, Oscar and the cat exchanged a glance.

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A dry breeze blew in from the deserted village. From horseback, Elze gazed out into the distance.

This had been a peaceful place once. At the time, Elze had thought things would continue that way forever.

She hadn't been unhappy with her husband or her life in the village. Elze had married the man she'd been ordered to and built a home with him. He cherished her, and their life was idyllic. She was very happy—up until the day the village was attacked.

The man who killed her husband. His eyes had seared into her.

Elze didn't want to see him ever again. She found herself unable to forget those deep green eyes, however.

How often had she wished to forget them? She'd spent many nights desperately wishing to return to how things used to be.

The more she thought, the more those eyes plagued her dreams. She had no idea how long it would be until she could escape them.

"What's wrong, my lady?" asked Carel. The question brought Elze back to herself. The young man assigned to guard her was from her village. The concern in his voice was plain.

Elze shook her head minutely. "It's nothing. I apologize."

Each time she was called "my lady"—the term of address for a chief's wife—it brought reality rushing back. She felt suffocated, like there was nowhere for her to go.

That hollow sensation was absolutely because she'd lost her husband. Elze could no longer see a place to move on to or a path to tread.

Ever since that day, she'd remained frozen.

"Elze," came the voice of the former chief who'd accompanied her. She turned around, only to seize up in astonishment.

"Why…?"

The king's expedition party was coming down from the rocky hills, but its members had clearly changed since they'd set out. General Granfort was at the head of the group, instead of the king. What's more, men who appeared to be Ito riders were mixed in among them.

Guards around Elze began buzzing with concern over what'd happened. Carel's face darkened at the sight of his hated enemies. Granfort, however, galloped over to Elze and said, "I apologize, but the situation has changed. We need you to come with us before we go to the village."

"Come with…? To—to where…? Why are they…?"

"It's a summons from His Majesty. You, at the very least, are to come with us," Granfort declared with a grave look. Then he turned his horse around. Numb with shock and incomprehension, Elze followed, only to be reunited with those green eyes she had desperately wished never to see again.

The rocky protrusions jutted up together onto a hilltop composed of reddish-brown rock. Upon that was a natural, open clearing.

It was circular, situated atop huge, natural columns. The site was so high that a fall almost certainly meant death. There were large pieces of stone that rose higher surrounding it, however.

Oscar dismounted from his horse and brought only the cat with him to the unusually formed plateau. He looked around with admiration. “It’s like a giant cage. Interesting. Didn’t know this place existed.”

“This is a holy place for the Ito. It is said that a long time ago, a god once visited this place.”

“A god? Was it Aetea? A child of Aetea?”

“Neither. The god’s name has been lost. It was some other deity.”

Javi’s strange way of speaking made Oscar glance at the witch in cat form, but the cat only twitched its tail disinterestedly. Tuldarr had been an atheistic magic nation, after all.

More than thirty Ito riders arrayed themselves around the holy clearing, making no effort to hide their hostility. Oscar paid their attitude no mind, inspecting the cracks and fissures in the ground. He looked up to ask Javi, “So you want a duel?”

“I do. If you want to call over men from the fortress to fight, I’ll send a messenger.”

“No need. I’ll make do with the men I have here.”

The guards who accompanied their king didn’t appear intimidated, despite being outnumbered nearly five to one. They glared right back at the row of Ito men around the edge, who were emanating cold animosity.

Just then, Granfort appeared at the top of the narrow hill road leading to the clearing. Elze followed behind him, and she turned white as a sheet when she caught sight of Javi.

He stared at her evenly. “It’s been a while.”

“Ah…” was all she managed to get out before going motionless.

Oscar cocked his head to look at her. “Did Granfort tell you the situation?”

“Ah yes…,” Elze replied.

She was what Javi wanted.

One year ago, he’d failed to carry her off. This time for sure, he vowed to use force to take her away.

Currently, Elze had no one to protect her. Her husband as well as the men of the village were all dead. So Javi insisted on having someone from the fortress that had taken her in act as her defender. Not wanting to engage in open war with the Farsasian troops and waste the lives of his clan, the Ito man had proposed a duel.

The demand was the last straw for the Farsasian side. Many lost their tempers and called the Ito audacious, greedy thieves. To them, the Ito were criminals and in no position to request a fair match. They wanted troops summoned to crush the raiders head-on.

The people of the Ito were not without their own complaints.

When they looted towns, they didn't kill women or children, and they had their own families to provide for. To them, pillaging was a duty they had to carry out to maintain their clan's way of life.

However, no matter the Ito's circumstances, looting and pillaging were acts that Farsas could not allow. There was no way that Farsas would simply nod understandingly and acknowledge the Ito clan's assertions. That was where the negotiations broke down. It was Oscar who'd quickly put an end to things.

"Before us stands an enemy that has long eluded us. If we can win the duel and get them to do what we say, that'll speed things up. That means that *you* are going to be the witness."

"I—I…," stammered Elze, so dumbfounded that she was like a hollow doll that couldn't move. She stood there at a loss for words as uncontrollable emotions crashed over her. Behind her, Carel scowled at Javi with eyes burning with hatred.

Javi looked away from them and pointed to Oscar. "You choose three of your strongest. I'll do the same. Sound good?"

"No problem here. It'll be over faster with fewer people. Truthfully, I don't mind if it's just you and me."

"What a stupid brat you are. All you do is mouth off. The people around you must suffer so much." Javi snorted. The black cat tried to swoop down on him from Oscar's shoulder, but the king wrapped a hand around its belly to hold it in place. The cat fought him desperately but couldn't escape his grip.

"If we win, you're forbidden from any looting and pillaging in Farsas from now on…and you know what will happen if you break your word," Oscar stated, his voice turning low and threatening all of a sudden. Javi flinched at the decree but concealed the unconscious motion and nodded.

When Javi turned around and gave a signal, two men from the line along the edge stepped forward to fight in the duel. After approving them, he stared at Elze, who was still trembling next to Granfort.

She stared back at him, her beautiful face fraught with fear. It was no different than a year ago. She looked so forlorn and helpless that a gust of wind could blow her away.

That, however, was precisely what instilled such attraction in Javi.

He had met her during a looting where the smell of blood roamed heavy about the air. Shielded by her husband's back, she'd struggled to hold him up. She was beautiful. Javi was done in at first sight. The fierce glint in her eyes as she'd looked at her husband had completely taken hold of him. He wanted to make her eyes glow that way for him.

Among Javi's faded memories, only the image of her remained vivid and bright.

He could never forget the look of shock in her eyes as she stared at him over her fallen husband.

He had never felt this much attachment toward another person. But he wanted her badly. He couldn't give up.

That was why he was here now.

Without taking his eyes off Elze, Javi rubbed his left arm. It had been magically reattached. Getting the limb back in proper working order had required a considerable amount of pain and hard work.

Elze's eyes widened slightly. Her thin lips trembled.

Scratching his head in annoyance, Oscar walked over to where his team was. "So I'm definitely one of the three. What should we do about the other two…?"

He grabbed the cat by the back of its neck and lifted it up to eye level. "Going by order of strength, this one should be first, but right now she's just a cat."

Just then, the cat's outline rippled. The tiny black kitten turned back into the witch's original shape in a flash. Oscar's face darkened as he scolded, "I told you not to change back. Are you asking to get punished?"

"Just because I was a cat, you can't grab me by the back of the neck. I'll suffocate!" Tinasha spat.

The others were speechless at the witch's sudden appearance. No one thought that the king's short-tempered little kitten was his protector in disguise. Rubbing the back of her neck, Tinasha said offhand, "I'll go."

"No," Oscar refused.

"Let me finish… Of those two he's going with, the shorter one is probably a mage."

Oscar eyed the two men standing in the clearing. Both the muscular giant and the short-statured man were carrying swords and didn't look like mages. If Tinasha said it was so, however, then Oscar believed her.

"Got it. I'll leave him to you."

"Understood," Tinasha replied, already starting to tie up her long hair. Drawing closer to Oscar, she whispered, "Also… Isn't there something strange about this place? I feel an odd presence."

"An odd presence… They said it's a holy place. Could that be it?"

"Mmm… Something about the story of 'a visit from another god' is fishy. If it wasn't some member of Aetea's lineage, then what did they take for a god?"

"A high-ranking demon maybe? That sort of thing happens a lot."

"It does, but I think it's something more…" Tinasha trailed off. The witch racked her brain, trying to figure out what it was that nagged at her. She shot a glance at Oscar with her dark eyes. "Maybe I should transport everyone to a different location? Like the castle training grounds or something."

"That would certainly be interesting, but I don't think they'd go for it. We just have to make our win quick," Oscar said, patting her head.

That was when a young man ran up to him. "Your Majesty! Please choose me!"

The appeal came from a rather desperate-looking Carel. Oscar gazed into his eyes, which swirled with resentment. “Why?” asked the king.

“They’re the ones who attacked my village. They killed my father.”

Tinasha frowned. Oscar took that in, then returned his gaze to the soldier.

“What’s your name?”

“Carel, Your Majesty.”

“Got it. You’re in,” Oscar decided, and joy bloomed on Carel’s face.

Now I can defeat my enemies, the young man thought. He looked over at Elze, but she was still deathly pale and staring at Javi.

The first fight of the duel was between Carel and Joaquin, the enormous Ito man. The spectators held their breath as the two men drew their swords and faced off. Carel had the slenderer physique by a long shot. Against a person as large as Joaquin, it looked like a child was battling an adult.

Joaquin looked down on his opponent and sneered. “You’re a survivor from your village? You should have stayed hidden.”

“Shut up, you savage!” cried Carel, readying his sword. It was obvious to all that he exuded inexperience.

The match seemed decided before it had even started. Javi, however, frowned at Carel. “That sword… Why does he have it?”

Carel’s weapon was the spitting image of a blade passed down from leader to leader in the Ito clan since ancient times. Javi was certain the real sword had been shattered in a battle during the previous clan leader’s time.

Javi found it suspicious. Then he recalled something from his childhood.

Deep in a sacred place, there was a story carved into the wall next to a mural—

“And start!” called out a voice, signaling the beginning of the match.

Carel swung his sword in a huge arc before running straight at Joaquin. He brought a blow down on his opponent with all his might. Joaquin deflected it with a smile, however. Carel slashed over and over at the giant man, but none of the swings ever made contact. Even so, Carel kept attacking head-on.

After a while of batting slashes away, Joaquin’s lips curved up and he struck down powerfully from above.

Unable to withstand the force of the strike, Carel was sent sprawling. The Ito guffawed as if they were watching an entertaining spectacle.

“Dammit…,” Carel muttered, face flushing with shame. He wasn’t even allowed a chance to get back on his feet, however. Joaquin brought his sword down to crush the young man. Still seated, Carel scrambled back. The desperate maneuver had afforded him safety, but it didn’t look like he’d be able to avoid a third attack.

Carel’s eyes shut in anticipation of death. No impact came, though, no matter how long he waited. He opened his eyes a fraction. “What…?”

There was a slender sword standing right before his eyes. Joaquin’s sword had been deflected by one much thinner and was now embedded in

the ground. A small pair of feet crunched on the sand next to Carel, who was still in shock.

“The match goes on. I’m up next,” said the witch in a voice as cold as ice. Her long ebony hair was bound up tight.

“You’re sending out a woman? Farsas must be running out of capable people,” sneered Javi.

“She’s actually *too* capable, if you can believe it,” Oscar retorted flippantly.

All eyes were on Tinasha, who casually readied her sword. Her formfitting mage’s costume threw her slim and elegant figure into sharp relief. The second man to fight, Inigo, grinned at her lasciviously as he gave her body a long, slow once-over. He pulled out a curved sword and faced her. “You’re a fine woman, though a bit too skinny. Maybe I’ll skin you.”

“You’re certainly welcome to try,” Tinasha invited, flashing him a cruel smile. When the start signal came, she leaped off the ground. Her strike wasn’t powerful, but it came down with fearsome speed. Reflexively, Inigo held up his sword to block it. The witch’s weapon worked so fast that the Ito man’s head was liable to go flying off his shoulders if he lost focus for even a moment. He reassessed his initial contempt of the woman.

In a cold sweat, Inigo blocked three more attacks, then poured his strength into launching one big blow. Tinasha dodged it and jumped back. After waiting for the right timing, Inigo aimed his sword point right for her. He cast a spell, pouring magic into it.

He brought forth an invisible rope and sent the tip flying toward Tinasha’s thin frame. Conjured cord twined around her, binding her instantaneously.

Her arms were lifted up, and with her wrists bound, she dropped her sword. The Farsasian side broke into a commotion when they saw that.

On the other side, crude grins spread across the faces of the Ito clansmen, who were well aware of Inigo’s power.

Not many mages used swords. Few would’ve guessed that Inigo could use magic, especially after taking his rustic dress into account. Inigo had used that misconception to take advantage of scores of people in the past, toying with them before killing them. Inigo had savored every petrified look when his victims realized they’d been immobilized.

Inigo approached Tinasha and placed the point of his sword right between her collarbones. She met his gaze evenly, not appearing frightened at all.

“No one said we couldn’t use magic, did they?” he snickered, sure of his victory. He moved to slit her costume open with his blade.

Before he could, his sword shattered apart with a ringing noise.

Inigo’s jaw dropped as he stared at the sparkling fragments lying on the ground. It didn’t feel real, and he didn’t quite register the evident danger he was in. He looked up to find his opponent floating in the air with a merciless

smile on her lips. In a lilting voice, she said, “You’re right. No one said we couldn’t use magic.”

Her ivory hands closed around his neck. Then the clearing echoed with the sounds of his screams.

“So that puts us at a draw,” Oscar said matter-of-factly, eyeing Tinasha after she came back from her fight.

Javi looked stunned. “What did you do to Inigo…? What is that woman?”

“A mage got done in by magic. I don’t think I did anything unusual,” Tinasha answered. She returned to Oscar’s side and undid her hair. “Okay, now let’s go home. Right away. As soon as possible.”

“What’s got you so spooked…? Well, go on, then, Tinasha,” he said. She caught his meaning and floated up to dab her blood behind his ears. That would allow a sword to get past his barrier, though not magic. Javi couldn’t cast spells, though, so that was enough.

As she was checking the spell, Oscar caught sight of her white earlobe and suddenly drew close and nibbled on it.

“Hyaugh!” she cried in a strange voice, blushing and jumping back. If she were still in cat form, the fur on her back would’ve been standing on end.

She pressed her hands to her ears, while Oscar tossed her an evil grin. “That’s for not doing what you’re told. Stupid cat.”

“Ugh! Why…?” Tinasha muttered reproachfully. Leaving her there, Oscar walked into the clearing, Javi following after him.

The air around them was tense. A dry breeze blew between the rock pillars.

Once he reached the center of the clearing, Oscar turned to look at Elze. He stared at her, something significant in his gaze. “What do you want me to do? Shall I kill him?”

Faced with this sudden question, Elze’s eyes widened and she gaped back at him.

She couldn’t think. No answer rose from her heart. Her breath came in faint gasps as she stammered, “Th-that man killed my husband…”

“I know. But that’s not what you want, is it?”

“Wh-what I want…”

All Elze had to go on were the facts of what had happened. She was born and raised in a completely normal environment. She’d gotten married as her parents had wished. What she wanted had never mattered. Elze had never been aware of a want or a desire of her own. She avoided what one should and never did anything improper. She had lived a very ordinary, stagnant life.

It was unthinkable for her to feel attracted to a man who was an enemy.

Standing next to the king, Javi’s deep green eyes bored right into Elze. She stiffened beneath the weight of his gaze.

She couldn’t answer, and Oscar eventually looked away to focus on his duel against Javi. He threw a sidelong look at the spectators and saw that

Tinasha—perhaps doing what she'd been told—had changed back into a cat and was perched on top of a small rock pillar with her paws and tail tucked under her body. She looked extremely serious, which made Oscar snort as he pulled out Akashia.

"Hurry and come at me already. If I don't get back soon, I'll have a mountain of work," Oscar taunted.

"Little brat… You better be ready," Javi spat. He drew out a long broadsword. It was crafted to prioritize weight over sharpness and had the ability to smash apart an opponent along with their sword when he struck at full strength. Anyone who'd ever faced Javi knew to fear that weapon, but Oscar didn't appear bothered in the slightest. Javi licked his lips and settled himself into position.

The start signal came.

As it did, Javi charged straight ahead. Immediately, he swung at Oscar.

His sword's powerful slash was surely lethal for anyone on the receiving end, whether they parried it or not. Oscar leaped back to avoid it.

Javi struck back swiftly with his heavy weapon, closing the distance between them with a sideways swipe. Oscar dodged the second attack. When Javi's next blow came, Oscar fended it off with the edge of Akashia. He then used his left hand to catch hold of Javi's right arm.

"What?!"

Oscar ignored Javi's cry. With incredible speed, Oscar drew back his own blade.

Formidable strength brought Akashia whistling forward, and the sword severed Javi's arm just above the elbow.

The limb hit the ground with a dull thump. Soon after, a bestial scream ripped through the clearing.

Javi fell to his knees in pain, but he still reached out with his left hand for his fallen sword.

Before his fingers could touch the blade, however, Akashia was at his throat. A calm voice called to the Ito leader. "Looks like it's my victory. I'll make sure you honor our agreement."

A cheer rose up from the Farsasian side. The Ito were breathless with astonishment.

Biting his lip, Javi glared at his right hand and his sword.

Elze nearly fainted as the match came to a close, but Granfort supported her.

Amid all the wild enthusiasm, her body felt strangely cold. Color faded from the world.

The only parts of the scene that seemed alive were the man groveling on the ground without his arm and the red of his blood.

She couldn't hear anything.

She couldn't say anything.

His green eyes took hold of her. His mouth formed the shape of her name.

The world lurched. Elze slumped over.

The next thing she knew, she was on her knees in the pool of blood, reaching out for his face.

“D… Don’t die…”

That was all she was finally able to say.

Javi’s emerald eyes were so much more brilliant than they’d been in her dreams.

Oscar exhaled and sheathed Akashia. He then went over to the black cat and placed it on his shoulder.

He turned back to gaze at the man and woman in the center of the clearing. The dazed woman was trying desperately to stanch the bleeding from the man’s arm.

Both sides watched in silence as the bizarre scene played out.

Oscar snorted in disgust and spoke to the cat on his shoulder. “Tinasha, can you reattach his arm?”

“I refuse.”

“I suppose you would, but stop the bleeding, at least.”

The witch wanted to tut at him in annoyance. Oscar had never intended to have her reattach the man’s arm in the first place. He’d just made an unacceptable request first, so that she’d agree to something less drastic afterward.

Tinasha wanted to protest, but in the end, she bit her tongue and cast a spell to stop Javi’s bleeding.

“What do you want to do about her? If you want to retrieve her, I will,” Tinasha said.

“She can decide for herself. If she’s been dreaming about him, let her face him herself,” the king replied, and the cat stared up at him.

That was when her dark eyes grew huge.

The wind died down flat and the atmosphere suddenly changed.

Sensing something abnormal, Oscar shouted, “Get away from there!” to the two people in the middle of the plateau.

“What?” Javi asked. He was the only one to react to Oscar’s warning. Elze wasn’t moving; her hands seemed affixed to the puddle of blood. She was looking down and away. Concerned, Javi put his left hand on her.

“Hey, what’s wr—?”

Something invisible repelled his hand.

The wind whipped back up again, swirling into a vortex with Elze at the eye. The maelstrom quickly grew faster and faster, throwing the people in the clearing into chaos. Oscar shouted at everyone, “Get down from here! You’ll get drawn into it!”

“Your order doesn’t decide anyth—!” shouted back an Ito member, whose words were cut off as the high winds pulled him off his feet. With a scream, he was swept out between a gap in the outcroppings and fell to the ground below. This shocked the other Ito clansmen into action.

“R-run!” someone cried, and panic rippled out among them. People crashed into one another as they hurried to escape. Cries of those being trampled could be heard.

Oscar kept a hand on the cat. The poor thing looked like it was going to be sucked up in the vortex.

“Tinasha, are you all right? What’s going on?”

“I’ll…teleport them…,” croaked a hoarse feline voice as a transportation array engulfed all of the Farsasian citizens in the clearing. Granfort and Carel disappeared with surprised looks on their faces, but Elze remained at the center of the whirling winds. She was stock-still in the pool of blood. Suddenly, from a corner of the clearing, Inigo shrieked and squirmed away.

Cracks opened up in the earth of the clearing. Immediately, they widened and the red bedrock inside fizzled into sand and started to crumble away, joining the windstorm.

“Not good… Tinasha, you okay?” Oscar asked again.

At this rate, the entire clearing was going to cave in. Oscar looked up at the cat on his shoulder.

Now the cat was breathing raggedly. Its tiny body was shivering, and its black gaze couldn’t stay steady. The witch was in a bad way, and a scowl crossed Oscar’s handsome face. He heard Tinasha’s feeble voice plead, “Oscar… You must…stop it…”

The king of Farsas saw that a white mist was seeping up from the fissure closest to the center. It was heading toward him, and he used Akashia to clear it away. The mist vanished when it touched the sword, but fresh vapor streamed up in an endless supply. The huge chasm in the middle was widening little by little, and some sort of particularly thick mass was crawling up from it. It looked distinctively human as it tried to stand up from within the deep crevice.

“What the hell is that…?”

The white mass reached its handlike appendages up to the sky. As it pulled itself free, it began to float into the air.

Something like that couldn’t be allowed to run free.

Oscar recognized that much intuitively, but there was little he could do in the face of such mighty wind. As a stream of sand reached his feet, Oscar brandished Akashia before the white creature.

Then he threw the royal sword into the air. It soared through the eddying gale and pierced the white thing. The strange creature’s body immediately dispersed.

Unfortunately, an even larger fissure cracked open the clearing. With a violent lurch, the cat fell from Oscar’s shoulder into the gigantic aperture.

“Tinasha!” Oscar shouted, reaching for her. He missed but dived in after her without a moment’s hesitation.

The king and the witch were swallowed up by the holy ground.

They tumbled into a pitch-black opening in the rock.

Before Oscar could worry about where they would land, the crevice opened up into a wide space filled with dim white light. He and Tinasha were falling toward a body of water. Oscar finally managed to catch hold of the black cat in midair, taking it into his arms.

Immediately after, the pair plunged into the water with an enormous splash.

Oscar broke the surface right away, boosting the cat up onto his shoulder. The cat had stiffened, its black eyes huge.

“Are you unharmed?” Oscar asked with urgency.

“Yu—”

“Yu?”

“Yuck, yuck, yuck, yuck! I hate water! I hate being wet!”

“Whoa, what’s wrong? Calm down,” Oscar insisted, but even as he spoke, the sopping wet cat was in chaos, attempting to clamber up from the water to his head. It dug its claws into his back in its panic, and Oscar patted the little animal. “I understand. You can change back into a human, so calm down. We’ve got to swim for a bit—don’t fall in.”

The pair were in a faintly lit, gigantic cave with walls of rock. It was much bigger than the underground cave Tinasha had taken him to on his birthday, though not as deep. It was more of a spring than a lake. Oscar was uninjured due in large part to his protective barrier. The considerable impact against the water would have undoubtedly broken something otherwise. It may have just been a spring that formed when underground water pooled, but to the wet cat, it was a full-scale calamity.

What Oscar said must have brought Tinasha back to her senses and calmed her a little, because she transformed back into her original shape. The shift hadn’t freed her of a cat’s fear of water, however, and she clung tearfully to Oscar’s neck while he swam.

“I—I got soaked… My fur got so wet…”

“You can swim. What’s gotten into you? I can’t see where I’m going; move your arm out of the way.”

“Cats hate getting wet! What is this awful place?”

“I’d like to know that myself,” Oscar said, pulling the witch into his arms as he swam the rest of the way across the cold spring. When they reached the shore, he hoisted her up first before getting out of the water himself.

Muttering complaints all the while, Tinasha dried their clothes. As she did, she froze. “Oscar… Where’s Akashia?”

“I threw it. I saw it fall into a different fissure.”

“I—I see…,” she said, most likely well aware that scolding him for something that reckless wasn’t going to help their current situation.

Tinasha sighed as she finished magically drying her and Oscar’s clothes.

“What happened back there? You were acting odd. So were Elze and that Ito mage,” Oscar pressed.

“Right… It’s strange that you were the only one unaffected by what happened,” Tinasha replied as she took in their surroundings. A lichen on the walls was emitting a faint glow that illuminated the place. The witch pointed to a singular rift in the wall. “Let’s walk and talk. I want to get Akashia back.”

“Got it. Sorry about this,” Oscar apologized, ruffling her hair, and her eyes narrowed happily. They set out along the path the rift had carved for them.

“Some sort of external magical interference was making me feel sick. A strange power from underground was coming up toward our internal magic. For people like me and the Ito mage who’ve undergone magic control training, it felt like something shut up inside us was forcibly churning us up. I felt so bad I couldn’t cast any spells. I don’t know what it was like for Elze, but I can only imagine…”

“Mine is uncontrolled, but I was fine,” Oscar interjected.

“You’re a bit of a special case… You also had Akashia. That Javi guy might’ve managed to avoid the feeling, too.”

“Javi, huh? You didn’t like that place from the start, and I guess with good reason.”

Regardless of what’d happened, Tinasha and Oscar were now underground. Oscar looked down at the witch next to him. “If you want, you can wait back at the fortress. I’ll look for Akashia.”

“Don’t be ridiculous. I’m your protector. I’m actually very glad I came with you. I shudder to think of you off getting yourself drawn into trouble without my knowledge,” Tinasha stated pertly. She then grabbed hold of Oscar’s sleeve. The witch may have meant her words to be a sign of her dedication, but it betrayed her compassion more than anything else. Oscar smiled and continued the march forward.

Beyond the rift in the rock lay a narrow, crooked path. Oscar ran his fingers along the surface of the wall. “This is man-made. Is this part of the Ito holy ground, too?”

“Most likely. I think the aboveground part is just a lid. The battle on that seal is what broke it,” Tinasha hypothesized.

“A seal… What of that white mist that was inside? Do you know what that was?” Oscar inquired.

“I don’t. There’s not enough evidence for me to hazard a guess. All I can sense is that it’s something bad for mages,” Tinasha replied.

An end to their path was nearing now, and they could see that it led into an open space. Tinasha was about to advance into it, but Oscar held her back. “Someone’s there,” he hissed, pulling out his dagger. Tinasha obediently followed behind him.

Concealing his footsteps as best he could, Oscar crept out into the round, empty chamber of rock. A man was crouched in the middle of it, and Oscar gaped at the sight of him.

“Did you fall down, too? Are you okay?”

It was Javi. He looked up at them with empty eyes. “You… How did you get here?”

“We fell. If you’ve got any fatal wounds, she can heal them,” Oscar replied.

“Hey, don’t speak for me. I plan to kill all of them as soon as I can,” the witch retorted, sounding truly enraged. Oscar grimaced.

He’d learned over the course of their time together that she was indifferent toward people who were hostile to her but merciless to those who treated him that way. She was much crueler than him, particularly to people who struck back even after their defeat was clear.

Both of them were confident in their own abilities. Oscar was content to let his enemies escape, but Tinasha beat them down thoroughly to nip any future revenge plots in the bud. It was not easy at all to rein her in when she was full of wrath.

“Leave it. You don’t have to handle everything. Besides, right now I have something to ask him.” Oscar turned to Javi. “What is this place?”

Murals and written characters were carved into the faintly glowing walls. Javi glared at Oscar and Tinasha as if they were something unpleasant. “This is the Ito’s sacred place. Only the leader and his closest associates know about it. Carved into the walls is the history of our clan… I’ve only been here once before as a kid.”

“Your history, huh? Interesting,” Oscar remarked. He walked up to the right edge of one wall, where the carvings looked the newest. Inscribed there was small, tightly packed text detailing the events of two years prior, with no pictures. In some places, it was too smudged to read, but here and there, Oscar could pick out words like *two of the same sword*, *the past*, *magic crystal ball*, and *memories of a clan*.

When he brought his face closer to get a better look, Tinasha called to him. “Don’t wander around. This is more annoying than I thought.”

“Hmm? What’s up?”

Tinasha was looking at an even older carving on the opposite wall. It was composed almost entirely of pictures, and she pointed to a drawing of a white human-shaped being. It had no face or clothing, and little balls were

depicted at its feet. The other humans around it were reverently bowing down to it. “This is probably their visiting god. It’s the thing that just attacked us.”

“Oh, because it’s white? Is it okay to decide that’s what it is just based on color?”

“There’s more written here that makes it obvious. ‘The god who came from another place found the devil fiends mixed in among the humans and killed them. Everyone gave thanks to the god and feared it. They made a resting place for their deity.’ In the early Dark Age, *devil fiend* was an insult for mages. Mages weren’t treated as people back then. This ‘god’ can provoke reactions in people with magic, revealing them to be mages. That’s why the Ito revered it.”

“I see. So they turned their sacred land into its resting place. But what is it really? It looked like mist. Is it a demon?”

“No. A demon would have its own magic. This thing was different…”

Tinasha traced a part of the wall. Oscar squinted and saw that it was what must have been the god’s name, judging by context. But it had been scraped off at a later date, and only some of it was legible.

“…ity…di…? I can’t make it out,” Oscar finally admitted, brooding over it.

Tinasha whirled around to look at Javi, a grim look on her face. “The god that came from another place. Have you heard where that place is?”

Javi’s face was pale, but he glared at Tinasha and refused to answer. She let out a huge sigh. “The fact that you’re here but largely uninjured must mean that you followed the path down here yourself. You didn’t fall like us. You came in search of Elze, right? You better start talking before it’s too late. She had magic.”

“Wha—? That can’t be…” Javi gasped. He struggled to get to his feet, but he fell to his knees in agony. After a brief moment of indecision, he finally decided to give Tinasha the answer that she wanted. “Th-they said it came from the north.”

“I knew it…,” the witch whispered to herself.

“Tinasha, what do you know?” Oscar inquired.

“I can’t be certain, but there’s another country with similar stories of an entity that can badly affect the mind and body of those with magic. Its mere presence was said to be enough to cause their magic to run wild and hurt those around them…”

“It can’t be…” Oscar had heard the same story. Just two months ago, he’d needed to review an account of it.

Before sending out Farsasian troops to aid in a foreign country’s religious war, he’d thought to study up on that nation’s cultural history. It was in that research that he’d learned of the entity known as the World-Splitting Blade or Sleeping Paleface.

A huge country in the north worshipped that fearsome creature as a god.

“…Tayiri’s one true god, Irityrdia,” Oscar muttered, completely stunned.

“Most likely, yes… That giant thing was what they deified,” Tinasha affirmed.

Tayiri, which had long expelled and oppressed mages, was where Irityrdia had come from.

It was what led mages to run amok and hurt people. That in turn had caused those without magic to demonize spell casters.

This Irityrdia had drifted in from the north and come to rest here.

Tinasha uncrossed her arms and asked Javi, “So what does this room connect to? You must have an idea of where Elze is.”

“…I couldn’t get in. It connects to a chamber just below the center of the holy place. But there’s an invisible wall, and I can’t get past.”

“I’ll do something about that. Elze and Akashia probably ended up close to each other,” the witch declared, looking around the chamber. She spied a door across from the passage Javi must have come in through.

“Oscar, will you wait here?” Tinasha requested.

“I will not,” he stated flatly.

“I thought so! I expected this! I want to forcibly teleport you home!” Tinasha shouted at him, just the same as she always did.

Oscar didn’t answer, instead offering a thought. “Won’t a mage be at a disadvantage against that creature? Won’t it just be a repeat of what happened earlier?”

“I’ll put up a defensive wall. Besides, I’m not a cat anymore. If it tries to send out more magical interference, I just have to push back against it. I’m actually the most worried about you without Akashia.”

“Hmm. Perfect timing—I’ll just borrow this,” Oscar said, picking up Javi’s broadsword. He handled it as if it weighed no more than a feather, and Tinasha felt some of the tension leave her shoulders. With no fanfare, the duo headed for the far side of the chamber.

Oscar pushed past the door that barred the way to a piece of mythological history.

Beyond it, a winding narrow path extended outward. The surrounding stone made the trail just wide enough for Oscar and Tinasha to pass through.

The witch walked two steps behind the king so as not to get in the way of any sword attacks. Along with a long incantation, Oscar could see a finely wrought defensive wall taking shape around them.

The air changed degree by degree. As he made his way forward, Oscar asked, “If Irityrdia is up ahead, do you think you can kill it?”

“I’m not sure… As we saw earlier, an attack with Akashia appears to be effective, but we’re up against mist.”

“A mist creature, huh? Guess we’d have to burn it.”

“I don’t know if I’d call it a creature… Judging by the interference I suffered, it was probably closer to a phenomenon. One that reacts to magic and rejects it.”

“Rejects magic? So it’s something like Akashia?”

“No, not quite that. Akashia dismantles and scatters magic here within the hierarchy where we live, but this phenomenon seems to try to push magic back to the plane in the hierarchy where magic primarily exists. The name World-Splitting Blade refers to how Irityrdia tries to cut through the gaps between planes in the hierarchy. Originally, we mages are born with power that’s on the magic plane. It feels like someone trying to make off with our very organs.”

“It definitely doesn’t sound pleasant.”

“It’s not. But that’s only true for someone who’s undergone control training and can store magic in their body.”

“And for someone like Elze?”

“…Their magic wouldn’t be so easily cut out. It could mean they’d be blotted out, soul and all.”

“We’ll need to hurry, then,” Oscar declared, quickening his pace. Finally, the path began to widen and led into a chamber that looked like the carved-out inside of a mountain.

Instead of glowing moss, darkness and white mist clung to the place. Oscar scowled as he peered at the way forward. “Isn’t there some sort of invisible shell up ahead?”

“There is. That was probably what blocked that Ito man back there from entering. Someone cast a spell to prevent Irityrdia from escaping. Magic wouldn’t have been enough, of course—that’s why I believe they transmuted their soul into a spell. The seal must be very old, though; it shouldn’t have held for this long,” Tinasha mused. She sidled up next to Oscar and stroked the empty air.

Then they heard a soft shattering noise. The mist was stirring. The white shroud blanketing the room surged forward toward them. But a few steps before it could reach Oscar, Tinasha’s barrier blocked it. Glaring at the strange anomaly, the witch waved a hand.

“…Move aside.”

The witch’s power pushed back the pale fog that threatened to swallow the two. Sweat gathered on Tinasha’s brow as she forced the vapor aside.

Once Oscar realized that Tinasha probably couldn’t endure this for long, he patted her shoulder. “I’ll be back. Don’t overexert yourself.”

“Be careful,” she whispered and nodded to him. Oscar took off at a run. He meant to look for Elze and Akashia, but he couldn’t see anything with the mist pressing in on him. Tinasha expanded her defense to encompass Oscar for a time, but once he got too far for it to follow, he dived into the mist alone.

That was when everything shook and warped.

It felt just like up and down were all out of order, yet Oscar’s feet remained firm on the ground. The persistent mist was trying to interfere with his magic—attempting to overwhelm him and the barrier Tinasha had placed on him.

It wanted to crush his body to a pulp, but Oscar marched onward, undaunted. “Elze! Can you hear me?!”

Judging by how the woman had been acting aboveground, Oscar had to concede that it was possible she’d been pushed off this plane of existence. Even so, he called out in search of her. An instinct suddenly commanded that he draw his sword.

Something came whooshing down at Oscar from overhead, making a high-pitched sound when it clashed against his blade. Oscar tried to push away the other weapon, but his sword was suddenly confronted with nothing but empty air.

Tinasha’s efforts forced the mist back farther, compressing it tightly.

From within the alabaster vapors, Oscar saw a person emerge. The sight of her caused his handsome features to twist. “You…”

It was Elze. Her blank eyes were darting all over, and she held something white and swordlike in her hand. It looked like she’d lost her mind, as if she was a marionette controlled by strings.

She lifted one slender arm—and threw the pale sword at Oscar.

“Ngh!” he grunted. While he repelled the attack easily enough, the hurled weapon dissolved and turned to white mist.

“It’s possessed her. Not good.”

A corporeal opponent was a far easier target, but there was no way Oscar could attack Elze. As he hesitated, she swooped down upon him again. He parried another slash of a fog-formed blade, but he was at a loss for how to proceed. Elze was innocent in all this. Oscar found himself trapped in a stalemate. Seeing that her attacks weren’t landing, Elze leaped far back.

Then she opened both arms and threw out her chest.

Oscar didn’t know what she planned to do, but then he saw mist start to move toward her open mouth. A steady stream of it flowed into her petite frame.

“Oh, come on… That’s where this is going?”

There was little to do but watch the strange sight. Oscar had to wonder how such a slender body could house such a vast quantity of the strange miasma. He was granted precious little time to think, as Elze began to emanate a gentle light.

Oscar deliberated for a moment, and then he kicked off the ground and closed in on her. He slashed down from overhead to put an end to the mist influx.

An ivory hand stopped his sword, however.

“What?”

Clutched in Elze’s hand was the blade of a broadsword powerful enough to cleave bone. While Oscar was surprised, his body moved reflexively. He let go of the sword and leaped back.

Swinging from the blade, Elze brought the weapon to bear down at the exact spot where Oscar had been standing just a moment before. The huge

sword she'd appropriated twisted like flimsy wire. As Oscar watched the weapon shatter to slivers in her grip, he wanted to burst out laughing.

"If this is what a god is, Aetea's downright docile."

"Come on now. You're the king. Watch what you say," came Tinasha's exhausted voice. Oscar whirled around. The witch had stopped trying to push back the mist, as there was no need now that it was contained inside Elze.

Tinasha wiped the sweat from her forehead as she came over to Oscar. "That was pretty heavy labor… Any mages who faced that thing in the past definitely fell into endless despair."

"You okay? You're really pale."

"I just feel extremely seasick. It's like something's churning up my insides… I can't walk straight."

"I don't feel it that bad," Oscar admitted in reply. His surroundings grew hazy in the mist, but it was nothing like what Tinasha was describing.

The witch shook her head feebly. "Half of my magic came to me later in life, so it's easier for me to feel the effects, I think… As for you, it's because your magic is sealed."

"Sealed? This is the first I've heard of it," Oscar said.

Tinasha's eyes grew wide for a moment, but she immediately smiled as if nothing was wrong. "Oh, really? Then it must be my imagination. Let's focus on what we're going to do here."

"I want to hear more about that later. Anyway, is there anything we can do about Irityrdia without killing Elze?"

"It'll be very hard… Magic has almost no effect on it, so I can't draw it out in the usual way. Having said that, it's impossible to destroy whatever's inside her without harming her body. The humanlike figure depicted in that mural may have also been a human who was possessed," Tinasha explained without taking her eyes off Elze. "A physical form to attack makes things easier for us."

The vapor that had once filled the room was now nowhere to be found. All that was left was a glowing woman in a dark chamber.

When she opened her eyes, they were completely white. From her slightly parted lips came a trail of fine mist. She appeared human but was something else.

The witch frowned. "For now, we need to get Akashia. It seemed to be capable of dispersing Irityrdia."

Oscar scanned the gloom. Now that the fog had cleared, he could see something glinting in the distance. Its occasional shine had been calling to him for a while now.

"But if I cut Elze down with Akashia, she'll die," Oscar protested.

"She will. But if that thing gets out in the open, something far worse will happen. So as a last resort—" Tinasha cut herself off. Oscar sensed someone approaching and spun around.

A man had emerged from the passage into the chamber.

“I won’t let you kill her,” he swore. He glanced at what remained of his right arm and declared with even greater determination, “I will *not* let you kill her.”

He was so weak he looked like he could collapse any minute. Still, Oscar and Tinasha knew his words were no bluff.

Oscar started to say something, but the witch held up a hand to stop him. She turned to Javi and said, “I understand how you feel, but something bigger is at stake here. Irityrdia has possessed her. If she’s turned loose on the world, it will be nothing short of catastrophic. Once anyone with magic gets near her, they’ll either self-destruct or go mad. A berserk mage is a threat to everyone. Things like that are the reason Tayiri has spent over a thousand years ostracizing mages.”

Tinasha’s dark eyes mirrored a dark abyss. Her gaze was the sort one could only acquire after watching bloody conflicts repeat themselves throughout history.

One look from those dim orbs was enough to paralyze someone. It was unmistakably the glare of a witch. How bottomless her eyes could be was something she didn’t regularly reveal; Oscar squinted at her. Javi stiffened, and the witch went on in a voice as cold as ice. “What she is now is nothing but a vessel that will propagate more innocent deaths. Do you want the same mistakes of the past to repeat themselves? If you fail to understand, then I’ll start by killing you.”

Tinasha’s tone was enough to snuff the life from those who heard it.

Normal people would’ve cowered and begged forgiveness after one look into those ebony eyes.

The witch was only speaking the truth, however.

Javi cleared his dry throat. He looked at the stump of his arm…but then glared back defiantly at the witch. “I don’t care who she kills or how many.”

“That’s enough nonsense. You’ve got guts, laying down your own life.”

“Even so…I won’t let you kill her. She’s the one I want,” Javi insisted, stubborn to the last.

Tinasha stared at the Ito man. Her eyes told him nothing, and Javi shrank back a little under the weight of her gaze. He held his breath and cleared his throat.

“…Please save her,” he begged.

Tinasha frowned, appalled. She rubbed her temple with a finger. “I suppose I have to. But you’re going to help.”

She looked over at Elze. The woman was in a state of total possession, standing stock-still in the open space as if waiting for her next moment of opportunity. Tinasha gave Oscar and Javi brief instructions. Javi looked unsure but obeyed and took his position.

“Do you think we have a chance now?” Oscar asked.

“Mmm… I wish I had some sort of medium to ensure it’ll work. But I was a cat, so I didn’t bring any equipment.”

“What kind of medium?”

“Normally, I’d use crystals. You know, like the ones we saw at the foot of the humanlike thing in that mural?”

Evidently, those ancient carvings were what Tinasha was basing her plan off. Without a conduit like the ones that had been depicted, all she could do was take over the job herself.

Oscar suddenly straightened up in surprise and responded, “Oh, I’ve got something that might work. Here.”

He pulled a small bag containing a crystal ball from his breast pocket, and Tinasha’s eyes grew wide. “Why do you have something like this? You’re not a mage.”

“Because it’s your favorite toy. I brought the one from my desk.”

“I’m human! I only made myself *look* like a cat!” Tinasha squawked, her cheeks puffing up. Despite her protestations, she received the palm-sized sphere and inspected it. “Urgh… It’s a little too big… Won’t fit in my mouth…”

“What are you talking about? It’s a cat toy.”

“It’s not a toy!” Tinasha insisted loudly. She squeezed the ball, and it shrank to the size of a small pearl.

“What was that? How’d you do that?” Oscar inquired.

“Shrinking magic is a real thing, you know. Now watch—the crucial part is what comes next,” Tinasha instructed, popping the reduced crystal ball into her mouth. Oscar’s eyes bugged out. Suddenly, Tinasha asked, “If I became a threat to the entire world, would you kill me?”

It was reminiscent of something she asked before.

Was that the same situation Javi was facing at that very moment, or was it different somehow?

The witch’s question sounded like that of a little girl trying to probe into something she didn’t quite understand. Without any hesitation, Oscar responded, “Only if it were beyond a shadow of a doubt that you couldn’t be saved.”

No matter the situation, no matter the circumstances, if there was even a sliver of a possibility, he would reach out to help her.

He’d set her forward and get her on her feet. They’d move on, even if she were smeared in blood and mud—even if she’d garnered hatred from every side.

If she’d truly closed off every option and it was all over already, however…

In such a situation, Oscar knew he would be the one to bring Tinasha to her end. When he took the throne, he accepted the position knowing he needed to be prepared for that.

His words may have sounded callous, but they’d showed that he was more devoted to the witch than anyone.

Tinasha was left breathless at Oscar’s reply.

And then…she gave a heartfelt, blissful smile.

Her eyes were soft with feelings she couldn't hold back as she gazed at him. "That's why I can fight. Because I know you'd do that."

She floated a few centimeters into the air and took Oscar's face in her hands.

Tinasha's dark eyes bore right into his. Then she closed hers, eyelashes fluttering, and pressed a kiss to Oscar's forehead. After pulling back, she whispered in his ear, "Let's go."

The witch gave a solid pat to Oscar's chest. At the same time, he saw the crystal ball go down her throat as she swallowed it.

Before he could think about what that meant, he broke into a run.

There was no more mist. Oscar was heading for Akashia, not Elze. The possessed woman reacted to his magic, taking no notice at all of Javi. Her eyes followed Oscar as he ran. A dozen arrows of that white fog formed around Elze before speeding after Oscar.

"Guess you're so predictable because you're not really alive," commented Oscar. Keeping an eye on the arrows closing in, he made a huge leap. The vaporous projectiles all missed, crashing harmlessly into the ground. With no change in expression, Elze motioned to summon up new arrows to chase him.

That was when Tinasha called out, "Hey, Irityrdia. Shouldn't I be the one you're aiming for?"

Her voice cut through the dark, and Elze's eyes swiveled to Tinasha. Clad all in black, the witch appeared not unlike a moon hanging in the night sky. "You were laid to rest here in this sacred place. I wonder how many sacrifices were needed to seal you away."

The question carried across the cavern. It filled Oscar's ears as he charged through the black. The closer he got, the more certain he was that it was Akashia sticking out of the ground. He picked up his beloved sword and was about to turn back when he noticed something scattered on the ground a short distance away.

"Are those…human bones?"

Scattered skeletons lay faded on the dark earth. Piles of dust had accumulated on them, and in their midst glittered freshly shattered crystal shards.

The witch's voice boomed. "You were held by an ancient seal but awakened in response to my magic. That is why you surfaced and reached for me…but I rejected you. So you took that woman instead."

Tinasha reached out a hand. Her eyes curved beautifully with her smile and then flashed with irrepressible rage. "So come to me, O god who has killed many and driven more to madness, who has left its claw marks on history. As a mage of this land, I—the Witch of the Azure Moon—shall face you."

Blue flames sparked from her hands. A colossal magic bonfire powerful enough to burn anything to a crisp at a single touch sprouted to life.

The flame was so different from anything found on this plane of the hierarchy that Irityrdia froze for a moment.

Then it let out a terrifying roar. “Aaaaaaaaaahhhhhh!”

The taut scream emerging from the woman’s mouth rang double and triple in everyone’s ears.

Elze kicked off the ground and attempted to spring an attack on Tinasha. Javi had gotten behind her, however, and held her back. As he restrained her with only his left arm, his face twisted at her inhuman might.

“Stay here… Do not go!”

Elze struggled in his arms like a broken doll. Javi gritted his teeth and dug in his heels firmly.

She fought and writhed, striking out at him with supernatural strength. There came the dull sound of bones breaking, and Javi doubled over, anguish writ clear on his face. He refused to let her go, however, and she let out a beastly howl.

They were entangled like that for a while, until Elze gave a jolt. “Ah… aaahhh…”

From her immobile body, a stream of white mist began to flow out, drawn toward the witch’s flame. The sentient white mist pressed in. As it came nearer, Tinasha flashed it a dauntless grin. “Come.”

The witch closed her eyes…and let out a little sigh.

Then…something winked out of sight.

“Tinasha!”

What she erased was the solid wall that was otherwise always in place around her magic. The first thing mages were taught was how to establish one’s individuality in the world, but she was a witch. Her distinctiveness wasn’t ordinary and neither was how she held her magic in check.

She had undone it entirely.

An almighty bundle of magical power was utterly defenseless.

The god turned into mist and surged toward it.

Tinasha extinguished her blue flame as the stream of vapor closed in but did nothing else.

The mist flowed right in between her red lips, entwining around her arms and legs and her waist. The phenomenon descended on her, trying to remove her magic from every pore of her body.

The sight was bizarrely beautiful and yet completely sickening.

Javi stared in shock, assaulted by nausea. In his arms, Elze fell limp.

“Dammit!” cried Oscar, running toward the witch. He realized what the piles of bones were. The mural had depicted smashed crystal balls and human remains.

Long ago, someone must have used the same method to seal away Irityrdia.

The process entailed using oneself as a vessel for a god—but humans were short-lived. So in order to prevent a god lacking a conscious will from going free after its human vessel died, a crystal ball swallowed internally

acted as a medium to store the god. Double vessels kept Irityrdia tied to this holy ground. The old crystal balls—the god's resting place—had shattered into pieces under the pull of the witch's power.

Tinasha had noticed the mist was sealed using two vessels…and resolved to do the same thing others had in the past.

"Tinasha! Stop it!" Oscar insisted.

If she became a phenomenon that only existed to kill…

Oscar would be the one to bring an end to it. He didn't plan on burdening anyone else with that responsibility.

Undoubtedly, that's the sort of role the witch wanted him to take. Oscar had always chosen paths that prevented the possibility from becoming an inevitability, however.

A beautiful witch. The symbol of the strongest, most abominable power in the entire land.

A queen with no throne from an empire that fell long ago. Oscar knew if he let go of her even once, he'd never get her back. She'd glide away as easily as water. Ordinarily, the two should never have met. The slip in time that had allowed it would carry her off.

That's precisely why Oscar knew he couldn't give up.

"Tinasha!"

Oscar grabbed her shoulders. By now, there was no mist remaining. A wisp of white breath escaped her slightly parted lips.

She looked up at him with empty, dark eyes. In a thin, weak voice, she said, "Not…yet…"

"What's not yet?" he demanded, but he was relieved to see she was still conscious. She wasn't lost. He could still get her back. Glancing down at her stomach, Oscar said, "I'm going to make you throw up that crystal. It'll be painful but bear with it."

If he separated it from her, they should be able to take another tack. He also wouldn't mind just going back to square one. The two of them could battle the likes of a god. He was convinced of that.

Eyes still vacant, Tinasha immediately responded, "But then it might get away…"

Her face was pallid as she looked down at herself. Slowly, she pressed a few fingers down on a spot in the center of her body, just under her rib cage. Then she slid her fingers lower. The black fabric of her formfitting costume opened up smoothly like a knife through butter. Skin as soft as virgin snow peeked out from under the gap.

Then her fingers stopped right over her navel. "It's here. You can do it, right?"

"Listen…," Oscar said in exasperation, having gleaned her meaning.

Irityrdia was inside the crystal ball she'd swallowed. There was only one way to keep it from ever truly escaping.

"Are you planning to make me disembowel you?"

Tinasha's plan was to have Oscar cleave her through and smash the crystal with Akashia. By using her own body as a decoy, the god could be slain. That was the only way.

The graceful lines of Oscar's face were all twisted in bitterness, which made the witch laugh. "Disembowel? You're the one most capable of finishing the job with minimal injuries. I'll heal right away, so I'll be fine. Besides, I'm used to getting holes cut in my belly."

"Can you be a little less ridiculous…?" Oscar muttered through gritted teeth.

It was true that Tinasha had experience with atrocious injuries, but that didn't make the decision any easier for Oscar.

Yet here the witch was, asking him to do just that, entirely naturally. *"Take up your sword and win."*

Tinasha gazed at Oscar's sullen face and tilted her head. "Do you not think you can do it?"

"Don't try to get me riled up, idiot. I'm just in shock at how shameless you are. Are you a cat?"

"I'm not a cat," the witch insisted. Complete trust shone in her eyes.

No—it wasn't even trust. Her gaze was saying, *You can do it*. To her, it was just a fact, not a matter of trust.

She was handing her body, her life, over to Oscar without a single doubt.

This woman was nothing but trouble, and that was precisely what he loved about her.

"Fine, I'll do it. You do your best to dull the pain."

Oscar wiped Akashia with a cloth.

This was the royal sword. It was meant for war. Its blade was not slender at all. But where he would be cutting bled out copiously even under the best of circumstances. He didn't want to nick any other organs. Taking off his left glove, he touched her skin to make sure of his aim. He traced upward on her soft belly, and she shuddered. "Th-that tickles… Don't touch it too much."

"Don't move around. Just try and bear it. If you don't stay perfectly still, I'll touch you more later," he warned her, and she screwed her eyes shut.

Tinasha used magic to anesthetize the area, and while she could stanch bleeding and heal herself, it wouldn't be possible to do so as long as Akashia was touching her. He needed to be as swift and sure as possible. There was little time left to wait.

Oscar looked down at the witch. Her breathing had grown very shallow. While Irityrdia was sealed in the crystal ball inside her, it was taking a heavy toll.

Oscar collected himself and grabbed Tinasha around the waist using his left hand.

"You're my one and only," he said, voicing a simple truth, the same way she'd done. "Concentrate. We'll beat this without any close calls."

“Yes, of course,” she said, grinning up at him just like a challenger in her tower. “Oscar, I’ve always, *always* wanted to beat a so-called god to a pulp.”

Her desire to fight was clear and honest.

The witch lifted her chin and closed her eyes. “Go on. Do it.”

Oscar nodded in acquiescence. Then he focused his strength into his grip on Akashia’s hilt—

And crushed the thing once called a god.

12. The Same Dream for a Time

After doing much more than he had planned, the first thing Oscar saw when he returned to the fortress was his old playmate on the verge of tears.

Lazar was at the front gate to welcome his king back, and his knees almost gave out under him when he saw Oscar.

“Y-Your Majesty… I’m so glad you’re safe…”

“What are you doing here?” Oscar inquired very matter-of-factly.

“What am I doing here?! I came running once I heard you’d gone missing! I was told there was some commotion over a duel with the Ito, but everyone was teleported to safety except you and Miss Tinasha!”

“Oh yeah…”

Oscar and Tinasha had managed to sort things out and teleported back. Apparently, Minnedart had been thrown into chaos during their absence. Cries of “His Majesty’s back!” echoed throughout the fort. Granfort and the others hurried over, then looked down at the witch lying in Oscar’s arms. She was half-asleep but opened her eyes blearily at him. “Is it time to explain…?” she asked.

“I’ll do the explaining. You just get some sleep. I’m taking you back to the room.”

“Sorry… I’ll go back myself…,” she murmured, vanishing away with a silent transportation spell.

Lazar had gotten an eyeful of her all covered in blood and ventured fearfully, “What happened…? Did the Ito do that…?”

“No, I did. I stabbed her.”

“Excuse me, Your Majesty?!”

“I’ll explain while we clean things up. Give me a hand.”

He was exhausted and desperately wanted sleep, but there was currently no one else around who understood the entire situation. Oscar gave orders to the people who had gathered around him and retreated to the makeshift study in the fortress.

He gave Lazar a brief rundown of everything. By the end of it, his attendant was left in shock. “I’m sorry, I don’t think I heard you right…”

“No, you did. You just don’t want to believe it. Accept the facts.”

“Why did you end up killing another country’s god when you just went out on a short observation mission?!” Lazar cried. The story about the battle with Irityrdia had left Lazar looking like he could fall to his hands and knees at any moment.

No work would get done if he wasted time doing that, though. The most pressing matter at the moment was the banning of future Ito raids. Oscar rested his elbows on the desk and placed his chin in his hands. “Well, all that stuff about Irityrdia is just between us. Maybe it was something else with a similar name.”

“No matter what it was, I’m just so very glad you’re safe… Oh, that’s right, there was a woman who didn’t come back, either. What happened to her?”

“Yes, Elze. After healing her, we dropped her off at the former site of her village. If she wants to, she’ll come back on her own,” Oscar explained.

He didn’t know exactly what answer Elze would decide on or how she’d face herself. If she chose to go back to her old life, the man who’d followed after her would surely escort her to the fortress.

Javi had begged the witch to spare Elze’s life, even in exchange for his own. Oscar trusted that Javi and Elze would work things out with each other.

After drafting the agreement that Javi had agreed to, Oscar passed the document to Lazar. Lazar read it over twice and asked, “This says that there will be a formal signing of an accord at a later date, but will the Ito really respect something like this?”

“Good question. If they don’t, we’ll just have to deal with them in a different way when that time comes.”

If the Ito didn’t accept, Tinasha would fly into a rage and possibly annihilate their entire clan. For their sake, Oscar truly hoped this matter had come to an end. He looked out the window; it was completely dark outside. “There’s still a lot to sort out, but can I go back to my chamber? I’m worried about Tinasha.”

“Go right ahead. I’ll take care of the rest,” Lazar replied.

“Thanks,” Oscar said, gathering up the bare minimum of paperwork and heading back to the room he and Tinasha were sharing.

He thought she’d immediately pass out after teleporting, but she’d had the strength to take a bath and wash off the blood. She was laying on the bed in a nightgown and looked up at the sound of the door opening. “Welcome back…,” she managed weakly.

“Are you doing okay? There’s no more fragments inside you, right?”

“If there were, I’d definitely know. I’m fine. I don’t have a scar, either,” she informed him. After giving a little yawn, the witch turned to lie facedown.

Oscar sat down next to her, tugging on a strand of damp black hair. “You’ve really gotta take better care of your belly. That’s gonna bite you when you’re giving birth to our child.”

“I won’t… I’m definitely not doing that… Anyway, you should get to sleep. It’ll be rough when the recoil from your magic getting shaken up kicks in later.”

“I still don’t feel anything, though.”

Oscar did have to admit that he was feeling exhausted, however. He stood to head for the bathroom, but then something occurred to him. Tinasha was already dozing, but he asked anyway.

“Are you going to sleep in human form? Did you forget you’re sharing a room with me?”

“I trust that you have a firm grasp on your self-control…”

“You’re gonna get yourself in trouble one of these days.”

“When I’m a cat, I curl up in a ball… But I want to stretch my legs… Just let me sleep like this for an hour.”

“…Go to sleep, then.”

Evidently relieved by that, Tinasha closed her eyes immediately. Her breathing turned deep.

Oscar couldn’t help but frown in exasperation as he looked at her. The witch was so defenseless in sleep. She’d cozied up to him considerably compared with when they’d first met, but he didn’t think it was in quite the right way. He stroked her hair and covered her with the blankets. “So typical… You’ve gotta stop trusting me so much.”

The weight of Tinasha’s trust in him felt like a comfortable load to Oscar, though.

He wished that he would always be the one she asked for help and that he would always be able to pull her out of distress.

“No matter what happens, I’ll protect you.”

The next day, he would take her hand again and they’d start their march forward. They’d journey to prevent themselves from reaching an end they couldn’t come back from. Even if that took a lifetime, nothing would make Oscar happier. He gazed down at his rare and precious guardian.

They carried the legacy of the Magic Empire of Tuldarr into a new era and destroyed the mindless god.

The story of the king and the witch still had many more pages to go.

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“I want to kill them…,” growled a voice in a dark room.

The speaker was a slender woman, and the fury in her voice seethed like lava sleeping underground.

Her red-hot hatred scorched her spirit as she awaited the time to unleash her boiling rage upon the world.

“I want to kill those two…”

“…You can’t. Not only is she the most powerful witch but the bearer of Akashia is her guardian. Make no mistake, those two are the strongest duo in all the land,” the owner of the room said in reply to the first speaker’s

litany of curses. She sounded bored, but lying below the surface of that was a placidity tainted with poison.

Her matter-of-fact statement caused the incensed woman to bite her lip. “Even so, I want to kill them,” she insisted.

“Weren’t you in the wrong? You’re the one who toyed with people’s lives.”

“I want to kill them…”

Her resentment ran deep. Her anger had deafened her to what the other woman was saying.

The owner of the room listened to the other whisper for a while before she suddenly gave a little snort. In an amused tone, the *witch* said…

“Then let me teach you how.”

Afterword

Hello again, I'm Kuji Furumiya. Thank you for picking up the second volume of *Unnamed Memory*!

The first volume was all about our protagonists meeting each other, secret plots, and many different little cases. This book dealt with a dramatic clash that is sure to be a pivotal moment in history. I very much hope you enjoyed Volume 2, which featured a declaration of war from a magic nation, a spell to reform the entire land, Tinasha the witch's past, and defying a so-called god.

As set up in Volume 1, this is a story that depicts the final year of the Age of Witches, which lasted three hundred years. At the end of Volume 2, there are only three months left in Oscar and Tinasha's contract. You'll have to read the next volume to find out what sort of challenges they face and what their relationship will look like at the end of the contract.

The story of the king and the witch will end there for the time being, so please stick with their tale of destiny until it's over.

Just like last time, some thanks are in order.

I want to thank all the editors who led me and supported me. It was because of all of you that I was able to revise a lot of scenes. Turns out the book needed a lot of rewriting!

Thank you, chibi, once again for handling all the character designs and illustrations. I have to say that you made the new character so good-looking that I had a moment of *Oh… Should I have treated him better…?* Thank you for rising to the occasion and drawing all of Tinasha's many wardrobe changes (including her cat form) and a giant sea creature! I'm sorry about that! Everything was so lovely yet again!

To Tappei Nagatsuki, who wrote a ringing endorsement for Volume 1, it's all thanks to you that this volume made it to publication! Thank you so much! You're really a huge source of encouragement!

Furthermore, I want to thank everyone involved in the production and publication of this book, including the designers, proofreaders, and sales team. I'm full of gratitude.

Finally, thank you to everyone who picked up this book. It’s because of all of you that I’ve been able to experience the unexpected joy of seeing my work get such a warm reception. It was even placed in the monthly overall category of the Light Novel News Awards. I made sure this volume would be just as jam-packed full of fantasy in the hopes that I could repay the favor somehow. It’s my greatest wish that you’ve enjoyed reading it. Thank you so much!

I hope we’ll meet again as one act of these unnamed recollections draws to a close!

Thank you so much!

Kuji Furumiya

Extra
After Awakening from a Dream

The witch was still asleep after Oscar returned from his bath. Her breathing was just as gentle and even as it had been when he'd left.

While Tinasha's wound may have healed, she was clearly exhausted. Oscar kept an eye on her as he sat next to her on the bed. Then he started going through the papers he'd brought. From time to time, he'd ruffle her hair just to reassure himself that she was still there.

He could still feel in his hands what it was like to stab her with the royal sword.

Oscar had felt the crystal ball breaking, but more than that, he'd sensed the blood gushing forth. It'd left him shuddering, even though he'd known it would happen. While exhorting Tinasha not to pass out, he'd raked out crystal shards and forced the wound closed. One experience like that was more than enough for him. Just remembering it made a shiver run through his body.

"Next time, we won't resort to such a drastic method."

At the very least, Oscar hated the idea of subjecting Tinasha to the exact same pain she'd suffered as a young girl. Even if she smiled and said she was fine, he wasn't.

If something like this ever happened again, Oscar would make sure they had another option. He only had to amass the power to make sure he could.

"Is she planning to sleep until morning like this…?"

Tinasha looked like she was sleeping comfortably; she was virtually motionless. She wasn't going to wake up. Oscar thought it wrong of her to be so careless, but he knew Tinasha wouldn't understand if he tried to explain. She trusted him too much.

Oscar gazed at the sleeping witch. He reached out to touch her cheek, but she didn't appear to notice it at all. Even a light poke didn't faze her.

"You really are so… Well, I guess it's better than you *not* trusting me…"

Tinasha treated him like a family member. That was preferable to being strangers, though. Oscar drew one lock of long black hair to his lips and

pressed a kiss to the glossy strands. A waft of light floral scent filled his nostrils, setting him on fire.

Oscar merely sighed and tamped down that fire of passion. Then he returned to his documents.

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"So then, what's going on with Miss Tinasha?" Lazar inquired.

"She hadn't woken up by morning, so I just left her," Oscar answered.

The Ito duel and its aftermath had put Oscar behind on his paperwork. Now that Lazar was here, however, he was quickly making up for lost time. As Oscar continued handling the documents, he added, "She's been sleeping nonstop. I think she's just extremely tired."

When he'd woken up that morning, Tinasha had been in a deep sleep. She didn't stir even when he tugged on her hair or shook her shoulders. Oscar had to wonder if she was truly unconscious or not, though, as Tinasha had erected a barrier to keep him from shaking her.

He could break the barrier if he wanted to, but drawing Akashia just to wake someone up seemed like overkill, so he'd admitted defeat.

However, the clock was about to chime noon. Maybe he should go check on her when he reached a good stopping place.

As he was pondering that, Lazar piped up hesitantly after dithering for a while. "By the way, Your Majesty, I heard you and Miss Tinasha are sleeping in the same room. Does that mean the wedding is…?"

"Oh, that," Oscar remarked, looking up and gesturing to Lazar to come closer. The attendant looked suspicious but approached his king, who indicated that he should bend over. Abruptly, Oscar ground his fists into Lazar's temples. "Just because we're in the same room doesn't mean we've gotten to that stage!"

"Ow, ow, ow, ow, ow, ow!"

"My self-control is the only thing that's advanced a stage! What the hell is she playing at?!"

"Y-you should ask her that…," Lazar grumbled, teary-eyed now that Oscar had released him.

The king picked up on a scandalized yet somehow sympathetic tone in Lazar's voice. Lazar was the only one he could vent these grievances to, but it was just as aggravating to have his friend pity him. Oscar forced himself to calm down. He rested his chin on one palm. "Well… It's fine. It's like I have a big pet cat. That's fun in its own way. I'm never bored."

"There's only three more months until the contract is over…," Lazar reminded him.

"And then I can just climb the tower again," Oscar stated, easily proposing a solution.

Lazar's eyes grew wide. For a few beats, he didn't know quite how to respond. "I think that might make her dislike you a lot…"

“She already hates the people who climb her tower. I’ve heard her complain about how annoying it is to reset the traps. But she’s the one who decided to grant wishes to those who complete the task.”

If Tinasha had heard Oscar say that, she’d probably shout something like *You’d teleport to the first floor even if the door was locked!* That’d be a less chaotic method of entry than using Akashia to smash open an entryway, though.

Lazar looked like he wanted to say something, but he gave up and just shook his head slowly. “Then I suppose there’s no problem. Take your time advancing your relationship.”

“I can’t take too much time, though. It’s not like I have a hundred years at my disposal.”

“I would think you could extend things for at least another ten years,” Lazar assured him.

Ten years felt entirely too long to Oscar, but that witch was really no different than an inexperienced girl when it came to interpersonal relations. Oscar couldn’t get impatient or try to rush her. Just like how she’d trained him, he planned to do the same with her.

That’s why the problem actually lay in another area.

“Lazar,” Oscar started.

“What is it, Your Majesty?”

“Do you think I can handle a woman like her?”

Ordinarily, the king would’ve kept this sort of worry to himself. It was the sort of thing he could only ask his close friend.

Tinasha was the most powerful witch. How relentless she was with her enemies was tied to how deep her feelings ran.

The previous day’s events had served to remind Oscar of that. Tinasha would’ve killed each and every Ito on sight with no hesitation. That was what she was capable of. What’s more, Oscar believed that intensity of emotion was greater when it concerned him and those close to him.

If Tinasha ever let those emotions drive her to cross a line…

Could he be the one to stop her? Could he be a force to keep her in check?

If he couldn’t, then he’d never been qualified to bring her down from the tower. The witch had chosen to live in such an isolated place precisely because she wanted to avoid that kind of situation.

Oscar knew he should never have voiced this worry. He’d never be able to forget it once he did. That insecurity would weaken him.

Even if it did, Oscar thought it the height of arrogance to never doubt himself.

Lazar gazed at his very well-rounded king in wonderment at his question…then smiled. “I think you’re the one who could, Your Majesty.”

“You think?”

“Yes. And I think Miss Tinasha feels the same way.”

It was true. That's why Tinasha had trained Oscar herself. It was also why she'd agreed to remain under his watchful eye after she'd fulfilled her long-standing desire to release the magical lakes.

Tinasha thought quite highly of Oscar and entrusted him with many parts of herself. She thought that he was someone who could use her well.

The young king, still with his chin in his hand, let out a huge sigh. "… Guess all there is to do is to try and live up to that expectation."

"She also hopes that you won't act recklessly," Lazar admonished.

"That's a different issue."

"Why won't you reconsider your actions when she gets upset with you every single time…"

"Maybe because it always works out in the end?"

Just then, there was a light rap at the door. Oscar called out for the person to enter. It was none other than the witch. She was wearing her formfitting mage's outfit and pressing a hand to her mouth to stifle a yawn. "I slept too much… I'm so sleepy…"

"You can keep sleeping," said Oscar.

"I came to check and see if you still have things to take care of after what happened. If any problems have popped up, I'll handle them."

Tinasha's dark eyes gleamed slightly with the desire to go out and fight. She wanted to know if any Ito had been spotted.

Oscar waved a dismissive hand. "There's been nothing. It's all fine. I'm going to finish things up quickly, and we'll go back to the castle at dark."

"Okay," Tinasha sang, rubbing her eyes as she leaned against the nearest wall. There was a couch for her installed in the castle's study but not in the fortress's.

She looked like she was going to pass out standing up, and Oscar frowned at her. "If you're going to sleep, go back to the room and do it there."

"I have to keep my eye on you… If something happens and I'm not around…I'll be in trouble…"

"I told you, nothing is going on. If you want to sleep, come do it here," Oscar insisted, beckoning Tinasha over. Since there was no couch, she could just turn into a cat and sleep on the desk.

Nodding, the witch tottered over toward him. Like a little kid, she clambered into his lap, snuggled into his chest, and closed her eyes. In an instant, she was fast asleep. Oscar looked down at her, jaw open in amazement, then came to his senses and patted her on the back. "Tinasha, I can't work like this."

"…Hmm…? Sorry…," she whispered as a yawn escaped her lips. Then she changed into her black-cat form and curled up on his lap again.

As the sounds of the cat's breathing floated on the air, Lazar asked again, "You really haven't gotten to the next stage…?"

"What's going on with her…?" Oscar muttered.

As he reflected on the past few days, he realized that Tinasha was becoming quite the sleepyhead. Whenever she was groggy and out of it, she behaved like a cat—spoiled and clingy.

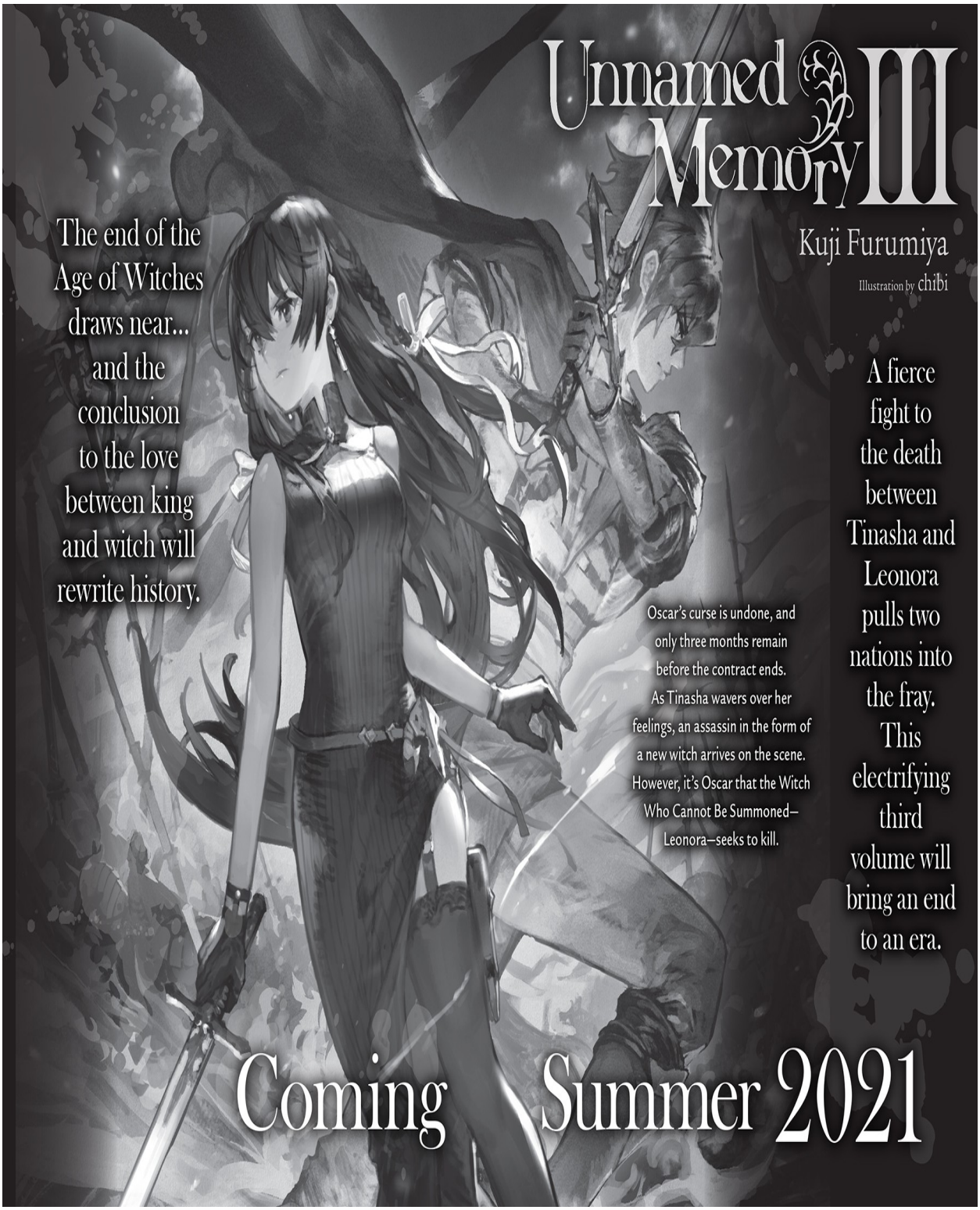
Tinasha was about to slide off his lap, but Oscar nudged her back to safety.

“She’s cute, so I’ll allow it.”

“I think you’re the only one who would say that, Your Majesty.”

“Who wouldn’t think she’s cute?” Oscar shot back in confusion. Lazar held his tongue.

The king smiled at the sight of the powerful and fearsome witch sleeping peacefully like a sunbathing cat. He gently stroked her dark fur.


Unnamed Memory III
Kuji Furumiya
Illustration by chibi
The end of the Age of Witches draws near... and the conclusion to the love between king and witch will rewrite history.
Oscar's curse is undone, and only three months remain before the contract ends. As Tinasha wavers over her feelings, an assassin in the form of a new witch arrives on the scene. However, it's Oscar that the Witch Who Cannot Be Summoned—Leonora—seeks to kill.
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